

THE VILLAGE VIRUS

A full-length play

By Tom Jacobson

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

GUTHRIE, 25-65, film librarian, SLOAN's sibling, also plays:

WIM, president of the Sinclair Lewis Association (in Sauk Centre)

CLARE DESPLINTER, Belgian-American librarian (in Sauk Centre)

CAROL KENNICOTT, young matron (in Gopher Prairie)

MONRO, 25-65, graphic designer and college professor, GUTHRIE's spouse, also plays:

ASTOR ULRICHSON, retired high school teacher (Sauk Centre)

NOVELIST (Sauk Centre)

MRS BOGART, older matron (Gopher Prairie)

MRS. LEONARD WARREN, matron (Gopher Prairie)

ETHEL VILLETS, librarian (Gopher Prairie)

RAYMIE WUTHERSPOON, clerk (Gopher Prairie)

WILL KENNICOTT, young doctor (Gopher Prairie)

SLOAN, 25-65, wildlife refuge manager, GUTHRIE's sibling, also plays:

CLARENCE ANDERSON, elderly Norwegian-American minister (Sauk Centre)

PLAYWRIGHT (Sauk Centre)

HARRY, a desk clerk and novelist (Sauk Centre)

SAM CLARK, merchant (Gopher Prairie)

MRS JACKSON ELDER, matron (Gopher Prairie)

VIDA SHERWIN, school teacher (Gopher Prairie)

MILES BJORNSTAM, Swedish handy-man (Gopher Prairie)

FIDDI, 25-65, project manager, SLOAN's spouse, also plays:

SIGGIE, produce clerk (Sauk Centre)

DR. SKLAR, doctor (Sauk Centre)

POET (Sauk Centre)

JUANITA HAYDOCK, young matron (Gopher Prairie)

MRS LUKE DAWSON, wealthy matron (Gopher Prairie)

BEA SORENSON, Swedish maid (Gopher Prairie)

ERIK VALBORG, tailor (Gopher Prairie)

The action takes place in and around Sauk Centre, Minnesota in the present and 100 years ago in fictional Gopher Prairie.

SETTING: Defined almost entirely by lighting and minimal props, fluid

GUTHRIE and SLOAN on an audio or video chat, lots of overlapping.

Don't respond!	GUTHRIE
I can't not.	SLOAN
[exaggerated exasperated groan]	GUTHRIE
If we let it sit--	SLOAN
It begs for a response, but--just--[noise indicating rejection]	GUTHRIE
It's blackmail.	SLOAN
Extortion!	GUTHRIE
I won't be manipulated.	SLOAN
Responding is <i>accepting</i> the manipulation--	GUTHRIE
Exactly what Astor wants, I get it--	SLOAN
A reaction--	GUTHRIE
The more outraged the better--	SLOAN
Exactly! So--[flatline beep]	GUTHRIE

SLOAN

But--c'mon--

(reads)

“a little attention now and then, an email, a card, a phone call--”

GUTHRIE

The calls are easy, actually, don't have to be long--

SLOAN

I'm not calling every goddamn Sunday at precisely 10:30 a.m.--

GUTHRIE

While I'm driving--just 20 minutes--

SLOAN

An obligation--and expectation--

GUTHRIE

Astor likes things regular--

SLOAN

Scheduled--

GUTHRIE

I do that--you don't have to--but an email--

SLOAN

An *obligatory* email--

(reads)

“So I know who to include in my will--”

GUTHRIE

A *quid pro quo*--kinda cheapens the relationship--

SLOAN

I'm not sucking up to Astor for ten thousand dollars--

GUTHRIE

Pretty sure it's more than that--

SLOAN

Even the farm isn't worth it--

GUTHRIE

I don't care either--but it's no skin off my back to just--

SLOAN

I'm not--chatty--

GUTHRIE

I mostly just listen--very low impact--[gasps]

SLOAN

What?

Guess who's calling me. GUTHRIE
 Don't answer! SLOAN
 That's what I'm saying! Don't engage! But-- GUTHRIE
 Don't! SLOAN
 Maybe-- GUTHRIE
 What? SLOAN
 Could be an apology--instant regret-- GUTHRIE
 Are you kidding? Astor? Regret? SLOAN I should answer-- GUTHRIE
 Even if--let Astor stew-- SLOAN [resigned noise] Hung up. GUTHRIE
 Goddammit. SLOAN
 What? GUTHRIE
 Calling me now. SLOAN
 Regret, I told you. GUTHRIE
 No way. SLOAN
 If you answer you have the upper hand-- GUTHRIE

SLOAN GUTHRIE
 Fuck that. I don't need the upper hand-- Astor's coming to you--

SLOAN
 Not any more. [hung up]

GUTHRIE
 OK, cool, we can ignore it. But when I call on Sunday--

SLOAN
 Take a week off--

GUTHRIE
 That'll frost 'em!

They laugh.

MONRO
 (off)
 Why's Astor calling me?

GUTHRIE AND SLOAN
 Don't answer!

MONRO
 (appearing near GUTHRIE with phone)
 Why not?

GUTHRIE SLOAN
 Astor just said if we don't pay more attention-- If we don't kiss Astor's ass--

GUTHRIE SLOAN
 [makes erasure noise] We're out of the will--

MONRO
 Then shouldn't I--?

GUTHRIE AND SLOAN
 No!

MONRO
 OK, it stopped. Hey, Sloan.

SLOAN
 How's it going, Monro?

Phone rings, off.

Don't answer that!

SLOAN

What?

FIDDI
(off)

Don't--

SLOAN

Hello?

FIDDI
(off)

Oh. Too late.

GUTHRIE

Astor? It's Fiddi. Fiddi--Sloan's--!

FIDDI
(appearing near SLOAN, on phone)

Hang up.

SLOAN
(sotto voce)

I'm sorry--I can't--okay, but--

FIDDI
(on phone)

Gimme the phone--

SLOAN

Breathe--breathe--

FIDDI
(twisting away from SLOAN)

What?

GUTHRIE

Try again. Oh. I see. I'll--oh.

FIDDI

Hung up?
GUTHRIE

Regretted that regret--!
SLOAN

Astor--
FIDDI

GUTHRIE MONRO
Been calling all of us-- So weird. Astor never calls me--

SLOAN
What was the message? We didn't respond fast enough so we're cut off.

FIDDI
Didn't get much between the gasps and whatever, but it sounded like Astor--is that right,
Astor--?

SLOAN GUTHRIE
Yes, Astor-- That's right.

FIDDI
--Was having trouble breathing and on the way to the hospital.

Lighting change. GUTHRIE and MONRO in
bed. MONRO is eating jackfruit.

MONRO
I'm not.

GUTHRIE
You *have* to go. For my sanity. Is that jackfruit?

MONRO
Want some?

GUTHRIE
No, I want--

GUTHRIE makes a weird noise and touches
MONRO intimately.

MONRO
No! No!

GUTHRIE touches more aggressively, more intimately, another weird noise, vaguely Gollum.

MONRO

I'm eating!

Another weird noise. They struggle.

MONRO

Do not grope me like a creepy witch from the forest! Do! Not!

Weird noises and intimate struggle.

MONRO

You're freezing! You reptile! You pinniped! Slivel over here stroking my popo with your boneless flipper! Stop!

GUTHRIE

I'll stop if you'll come to Minnesota.

MONRO

Just so we stay in the will?

GUTHRIE

Astor's on a ventilator!

MONRO

Sloan and Fiddi are going?

GUTHRIE

Reluctantly. You can teach online.

MONRO

I don't care about the farm, but Astor was loathe to part with a penny, so I bet there's tons of cash.

GUTHRIE

Mercenary!

MONRO

Sloan thinks you call Astor every week so you can get the farm.

GUTHRIE

Sloan knows better. When we were kids we both collected stamps like my dad, who had this great stamp album from about a dozen years of serious collecting.

MONRO

What happened to your stamps?

GUTHRIE

Sloan and I both wanted it and argued about who Dad would give it to.

GUTHRIE

A few years later my grandma died, and the spectacle of the adults--fighting--[derisive noise]--over an old Chevy and Christmas ornaments--

MONRO

What kind of Chevy?

GUTHRIE

--Sloan and I were just teens, but we looked at each other and said "you can have the stamps."

MONRO

Nothing uglier than fighting at a funeral.

GUTHRIE

We didn't fight when Mom died.

MONRO

Even split, very fair.

GUTHRIE

She should have given them more, with all they did for her.

MONRO

They got half her social security every month!

GUTHRIE

Way cheaper than assisted living, and could you imagine Mom living with us? You woulda been *Throw Momma from the Train*--

MONRO

Some day you should just be honest with Sloan.

GUTHRIE

We're not always at each others' throats, like you and your sister.

MONRO

At least she and I really know each other.

GUTHRIE

Sloan and I have all kinds of memories together, stuff only siblings know. Lots of them from the farm.

MONRO

Shallow. You should argue.

GUTHRIE

You and I never argue.

MONRO

Yes, we do.

GUTHRIE

No, we don't.

MONRO

Yes, we do.

GUTHRIE

You never really know anybody. I have no idea who you are. I just *imagine* who you are. Everybody just imagines everybody else. Sloan and Fiddi are imagining us right now. [imagining noise]

Lighting change. SLOAN and FIDDI in bed.
FIDDI sniffs SLOAN, who is reading.

FIDDI

Ma baho nang killi killi. [Your armpits stink]

SLOAN

Ma baho nang bek bek mo. [Your pussy stinks]

FIDDI

What did Astor do?

SLOAN

High school teacher. Drama, I think. Then did training for a bank or something. Volunteered at the Sinclair Lewis Association for a while.

FIDDI

I can't wait to see the farm. It sounds--
(consults phone)

Sanative.

SLOAN

Now we can even go in the house.

FIDDI

You couldn't before?

SLOAN

When our grandparents were alive, we'd drive up from Texas to stay with them two weeks every summer, but when Astor inherited, we had to stay in a motel because we weren't even invited into the house. Mom used to fake she had to pee to get inside.

FIDDI

Extraño tu mama. [I miss your mom]

SLOAN

Yo, tambien. [Me, too]

FIDDI

What's the Sinclair Lewis Association?

SLOAN

Lewis wrote a book about Sauk Centre. They didn't like it, but then he won the Pulitzer and now the whole town is about him.

FIDDI

It's good?

SLOAN

Guthrie read it, I think.

FIDDI

So...Guthrie calls Astor. Every Sunday...?

SLOAN

To hear what Astor's seen on television and if the prairie grass is blooming.

FIDDI

Very smart!

SLOAN

Astor could die alone on the farm and turn into a mummy or be devoured by skunks before anyone found out.

FIDDI

What a gift to be so oblivious.

Lighting change. GUTHRIE reports to
SLOAN, FIDDI and MONRO at the hospital.

GUTHRIE

We can't go in ICU.

MONRO

Don't they know we're family?

GUTHRIE

Restrictions--

SLOAN

Astor's in a coma. It's not like our presence makes a difference.

FIDDI

If this was my family, I'd be making *un gran hedor*. [a big stink]

GUTHRIE

We *are* your family.

FIDDI

I haven't even *met* Astor.

GUTHRIE

And you won't until they lift restrictions. Wanna go to Dairy Queen?

SLOAN

I guess.

MONRO

Sauk Centre's really rolled out the beige carpet for us. Holy crap, look!

(pointing as they get in a car)

That's supposed to be drop-shadow signage, but the shadow is above!

FIDDI

Bad use of majescule--

MONRO

I bet the grocery doesn't even have
jackfruit.

SLOAN

(laughing)

Jackfruit!

FIDDI

Let's skip Dairy Queen and go straight to the farm. I don't have my lactose pills.

MONRO

The farm is classic, red barn--

GUTHRIE
(overlapping)

Very Lassie Come Home.

SLOAN drives them.

SLOAN

Not any more.

FIDDI
Did the cows die?

GUTHRIE
The barn's still there.

SLOAN
Astor put it all back to nature over the last 30 years.

GUTHRIE
But no more cows, pigs, chickens--

SLOAN
Planted native prairie, native woodland, and let the sloughs fill up with water again.

FIDDI
What are sloughs?

GUTHRIE
Ponds.

MONRO
Swamps.

FIDDI enters the word in phone.

GUTHRIE
Sloan and Dad helped Astor plant the trees--which is what got you interested in wildlife management.

SLOAN
Sorta.

GUTHRIE
How's that going with the sharpnose shiners?

MONRO
The what?

FIDDI
This endangered minnow. Sloan's trying to get a refuge declared on the Upper Brazos River--

MONRO

A wildlife refuge in Texas? Good luck!

FIDDI

There are twenty already!

SLOAN

The Upper Brazos would be nineteen.

GUTHRIE

So cool! There's the mailbox, turn here--

SLOAN

I know!

GUTHRIE

--See the barn?

MONRO

And Lassie?

FIDDI

It's like a postcard! Bucolic! Georgic!

MONRO

Georgic?

SLOAN

Do you have a key?

GUTHRIE

We're gonna have to break in.

Car stops.

SLOAN AND MONRO

Break in?

Lights out on everyone but SLOAN.

SLOAN

Both the sharpnose shiner (*Notropis oxyrhynchus*) and smalleye shiner (*Notropis buccula*) are native to variable-flow prairie creeks of north-central Texas and listed as endangered since 2013. Although extinct in the Wichita River, the sharpnose minnow is still common in the Upper Brazos and tributaries above Possum King Lake. It's almost entirely gone from the lower river system. Our presentation today is in support of a new riparian wildlife refuge for both species in the Upper Brazos basin.

Lights out on SLOAN and up on FIDDI holding an old rifle as GUTHRIE and MONRO stare in horror.

GUTHRIE
Where'd you find that?

FIDDI
In the gun rack. Quite a trouvaille!

GUTHRIE
Gun rack?

MONRO
Astor hunted?

FIDDI
This isn't a hunting rifle, it's a Dragunov SVD.

MONRO
Russian?

FIDDI
Bol'shoye tebe, spasibo. [Good for you, thanks] Soviet. Late 50s.

GUTHRIE
Wait. Gun rack?!

FIDDI
(gestures)
About 30 of them in there.
(aims)

GUTHRIE disappears.

MONRO
Don't!

GUTHRIE makes a freaky noise, off.

FIDDI
I know how to handle a sniper rifle.

GUTHRIE
(returns with a rifle)
No wonder Astor stopped letting us into the house!

GUTHRIE
It's an arsenal!

MONRO
Collector's items?

GUTHRIE
Yeah, from Franklin Mint.

FIDDI
How about a little target practice behind
the barn?

GUTHRIE
Um...these are Astor's.

FIDDI
Astor isn't about to object or whatever.

MONRO
What could you hunt with that--deer?

FIDDI
The ammo for these is full metal jacket, not great for a soft target like a deer. Probably go
right through 'em, and they'd run hundreds of yards before falling over.

SLOAN
(appearing with car keys)
Wanna go on a farm tour? Cool, a Dragunov!

Lights out on everyone but GUTHRIE.

GUTHRIE
A hundred and sixty acres, been in the family since 1873 when our great-great-
grandparents came from Sweden, surrounded by other homestead farms, native forest to
the north going down a hill to the Sauk River. The house got moved to the present
location about 1900, additions in the twenties, fifties, eighties. Sold the animals when
Grandpa died.

Lights up on all. Driving again, rough road.

SLOAN
(pointing)
Astor and Dad dropped a load of hay on some cousin up there and he smothered.

GUTHRIE
It was the hired man.

MONRO
He died?

GUTHRIE

Our great grandfather died in the barn, too. Took his blackberry brandy up there one night in 1919 and grandpa found him in the manure gutter with a broken neck the next morning.

MONRO

He fell?

SLOAN

The worst was that kid who fell in the silo when it was full of corn.

FIDDI

And sank down in?

GUTHRIE

Like *Witness*, but reversed.

MONRO

Could they pull him out?

GUTHRIE

Of the bottom, two days later. The weight of the corn crushed the kernels into his eyes and broke the bones of his face.

FIDDI

This farm is cursed!

SLOAN

And there was the combine accident.

GUTHRIE

(winks)

I don't believe that story about a native American graveyard.

MONRO

Stop with the *Poltergeist*!

FIDDI

Everything around here's called Sauk. That's a tribe, isn't it?

GUTHRIE

Probably Dakota Sioux territory.

SLOAN

How do you know this shit?

GUTHRIE

It's all in *Main Street*. You should read it. I think Astor has 10 copies.

MONRO

But it's fiction, right?

GUTHRIE

Right. Harry Sinclair Lewis turned Sauk Centre into Gopher Prairie and made fun of it. If you don't wanna read it, maybe Astor has it on DVD.

SLOAN

Or VHS.

MONRO

Or Netflix.

EVERYONE ELSE

No internet.

SLOAN

Is that the slough where Inga drowned?

Lights out on everyone but GUTHRIE.

GUTHRIE

(producing a stack of books)

Main Street is the quickest way to understand Sauk Centre, at least historically, and it was made into a movie in 1936 called *I Married a Doctor*. I drove closer to town until I got somebody's wife and did a sweep all over and couldn't find *I Married a Doctor* anywhere. It'll probably pop up on TCM at some point, but I have a friend in LA who might be able to find it for me. In the meantime, I was right about Astor and VHS.

(produces several VHS tapes)

The machine still works, so we have: *Arrowsmith* with Ronald Colman and Helen Hayes from 1931; *Ann Vickers* starring Irene Dunn and Walter Huston in 1933; *Babbitt*, 1934, starring Guy Kibbee; *Elmer Gantry*, which won Oscars in 1960 for Burt Lancaster and Shirley Jones; and by most reckonings the best Sinclair Lewis movie, *Dodsworth*, with Mary Astor and Walter Huston--again--in 1936.

Lights up on SLOAN, FIDDI and MONRO eating and/or drinking.

SLOAN

Elmer Gantry.

GUTHRIE AND MONRO

We already saw that--

GUTHRIE

--Three years ago.

MONRO

--Like ten years ago.

GUTHRIE
Not that long.

MONRO
At least a decade!

FIDDI
Shouldn't we view them seriatim?

GUTHRIE
That would be--
(holds up book *Main Street*)
But I just said I can't find the movie.

MONRO
(taking a copy)
Why don't we read it out loud, taking turns?

FIDDI
Or different characters?

SLOAN
Not the whole thing, please!

MONRO
Excerpts! Pick highlights!

GUTHRIE
You're just trying to get out of reading it.

MONRO, FIDDI, SLOAN
We won't!

GUTHRIE
There's a ton of characters.

MONRO
So?

FIDDI
Uno momento.
(takes a copy and leaves)

GUTHRIE
OK, you asked for it.
(thumbs through book)
It made an impression when I was a geeky teen--there was an early scene--yeah, here--

FIDDI returns with a number of hats.

SLOAN
What?

FIDDI

(passing out winter hats)

A different chapeau for each character.

SLOAN

I'm gonna get internet installed.

MONRO

We can't just start in the middle--

GUTHRIE

This is an emblematic scene--you'll figure it out--

SLOAN

Synopsis?

GUTHRIE

(points to MONRO)

A young doctor, Will Kennicott, marries--

(indicates self)

Carol Milford, from Mankato, Minnesota. He brings her back to his home town of Gopher Prairie and at a party in her honor introduces her to all his friends--

(points to MONRO)

MONRO AS WILL

(reads)

"Well, the nice-looking couple over there are Harry Haydock and his wife, Juanita. Harry's dad owns most of the Bon Ton department store, but it's Harry who runs it and gives it the pep."

FIDDI puts a hat on MONRO.

MONRO AS WILL

"Next to him is Dave Dyer the druggist--you met him this afternoon--mighty good duck-shot. The old cheese there is Luke Dawson, the richest man in town."

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

"I'll like everybody! I'll be the community sunbeam!"

GUTHRIE points to SLOAN, who picks up the narration.

SLOAN

"He led her to the Dawsons. Luke Dawson--lender of money on mortgages, owner of Northern cut-over land, was a hesitant man in unpressed soft gray clothes, with bulging eyes in a milky face. His wife had bleached cheeks, bleached hair, bleached voice and a bleached manner."

GUTHRIE points to FIDDI.

FIDDI

(dons a hat, becomes MRS LUKE
DAWSON)

“Do you like Gopher Prairie?”

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

“Oh, I’m sure I’m going to be ever so happy.”

FIDDI AS MRS LUKE DAWSON

“There’s so many nice people.”

SLOAN

“The young smart set of Gopher Prairie. Juanita Haydock--”

(GUTHRIE points to FIDDI, who
changes hats)

“Flung at her in a high, cackling, friendly voice.”

FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK

“Well, this is so nice to have you here. You’ll have to join the Jolly Seventeen. We play bridge and we have a supper once a month. You play, of course.”

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

“I’ve always been such a bookworm.”

FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK

“We’ll have to teach you. Bridge is half the fun of life.”

SLOAN

“Juanita had become patronizing, and she glanced disrespectfully at Carol’s golden sash, which she had previously admired.”

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

“I used to be rather good at bezique.”

SLOAN

“Carol’s lie was a triumph. Juanita’s handsome, high-colored, horsey face showed doubt. Carol snatched up the conversation. She laughed and was frivolous and rather brittle.”

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

“These-here celebrated Open Spaces, that’s what I’m going out for. Will converted me on our Colorado trip.

You may think that Herr Doctor Kennicott is a Nimrod, but you ought to have seen me daring him to strip to his BVDs and go swimming in an icy mountain brook.”

SLOAN

“But Carol could not keep it up. She discovered that conversation did not exist in Gopher Prairie. Even at this affair, which brought out the young smart set, the hunting squire set, the respectable intellectual set, and the solid financial set, they sat up with gaeity as with a corpse.”

(points to MONRO, dons a hat)

MONRO

“Sam Clark had been talking to Carol about motor cars, but he felt his duties as host.”

SLOAN AS SAM CLARK

“Must stir ‘em up. Don’t you think I better stir ‘em up? Let’s have some stunts, folks!”

FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK

(shrieks)

“Yes, let’s!”

SLOAN AS SAM CLARK

“Say, Dave, give us that stunt about the Norwegian catching a hen.”

MONRO AS WILL

“You bet! That’s a slick stunt! Do that, Dave!”

FIDDI

“Mr. Dave Dyer obliged.”

GUTHRIE

(lowering the book)

Oh, yeah, I remember--

FIDDI

It’s certainly jocose.

MONRO

What?

GUTHRIE

Everyone in Sauk Centre when we were kids was--

(uses foods or cocktails for each)

--Norwegian, Swedish, German or Belgian--

SLOAN

Or Bohunks!

GUTHRIE

And bizarre prejudices--

(again using foods or cocktails)

Norwegians have messy farms, Germans are mean, Polacks--of course--are stupid, and Belgians, well--

GUTHRIE AND SLOAN

Drinking's all those Belgians know!

GUTHRIE

Grandma's parents came from Norway and Grandpa's from Sweden, so it was considered a mixed marriage. But I forgot in the book hardly anybody is Scandinavian, only servants and poor farmers everyone makes fun of--the recent immigrants--

SLOAN

(Norwegian accent)

Ten thousand Swedes ran through the weeds
Pursued by one Norwegian

The others gape as lights fade on them and
SLOAN continues.

SLOAN

Ten thousand more ran to the shore
In the Battle of Copenhagen
Old Grandpa said and he would know,
The Swedes one day set sail
To visit Copenhagen
And kick some Norskie tail
But history books, so Grandpa says,
Reveal the Norskies won
They beat up all the Swedes and Danes
And had a bunch of fun
Ten thousand Swedes ran through the weeds
Pursued by one Norwegian
The dusty weeds
Made snuff for the Swedes
Who called it Copenhagen

Lights up on GUTHRIE and MONRO, who is
putting on clothes to go out. GUTHRIE is
reading *Main Street*.

MONRO

I liked the Black doctor.

GUTHRIE

What?

MONRO

(indicates VHS tape)

In *Arrowsmith*. Very enlightened portrayal for 1931.

GUTHRIE

Only redeeming feature of a pretty boring movie.

MONRO

The plague section had a lot of resonance.

GUTHRIE

I like the Lewis books better than the movies, believe it or not, especially--

(indicates book)

Main Street.

MONRO

(re: outfit)

What do you think? Too gay?

GUTHRIE

Medium. Listen: "The Village Virus is a germ that infects ambitious people who stay too long in the provinces. You'll find it epidemic among lawyers and doctors and ministers and college-bred merchants who've had a glimpse of the world that thinks and laughs, but return to their swamp."

MONRO

(adjusting outfit)

Of course, I don't really care what they think.

GUTHRIE

We won't be in town long.

MONRO

It's the Lacanian Paradigm.

GUTHRIE

What is?

MONRO

Are you who you believe yourself to be, who you want others to *think* you are, or who others *actually* perceive you to be? The Real, the Imaginary, or the Symbolic?

(puts finishing touch on outfit)

There!

GUTHRIE

You're completely Imaginary.

Lights out on GUTHRIE and up on SIGGIE, a produce clerk played by FIDDI.

MONRO

Do you have jackfruit?

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

What's that?

MONRO

How about dragonfruit?

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

Try the juice aisle.

MONRO

Rambutan? Lychee?

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

(pointing)

Maybe canned.

MONRO

But not fresh?

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

Oh, no.

Lights out on them and up on SLOAN with WIM, played by GUTHRIE.

SLOAN

Thank you for taking Astor to the hospital.

GUTHRIE AS WIM

I was Astor's student, so we go way back. No trouble a-tall.

SLOAN

Astor told Guthrie you've been helping out a lot.

GUTHRIE AS WIM

Oh, easy stuff. Legal, banking, funeral home--Astor asked for help writing the obituary.

SLOAN

Everything on schedule.

GUTHRIE AS WIM

Planned out! That's Astor!

SLOAN

And you're the executor of the will.

GUTHRIE AS WIM

There are some charitable bequests and of course something for your generation. I guess there's still a bit of a question about the farm, which is of course the primary asset.

SLOAN

What's the question?

GUTHRIE AS WIM

Do you want it?

SLOAN

Me? Personally? No!

GUTHRIE AS WIM

Why not?

SLOAN

I just want to know I'll always be able to come visit like we did when we were kids. Feeling connected to who we are--or at least who we were.

GUTHRIE AS WIM

So Guthrie'd like to have it?

SLOAN

(laughs)

I'm trying to imagine Guthrie living here! Kind of hard to run the Los Angeles Film Society from Minnesota!

GUTHRIE AS WIM

Then you see the problem.

Lights out on GUTHRIE AS WIM and up on FIDDI.

FIDDI

I don't see why we couldn't live here.

SLOAN

It gets really cold.

FIDDI

I can adapt to anything. I can learn Norwegian: *Hvordan har du det i dag.* [*How are you today?*]

SLOAN

God. Mange tusen takk. [Good. Many thousand thanks]

FIDDI

Know any Swedish?

SLOAN

Satan gå till helvetet. [*Devil go to hell*]

FIDDI

That's not very nice, is it?

SLOAN

No.

FIDDI

Profanities aside, the people are so polite and down to earth.

Lights on MONRO looking at phone.

MONRO

Wow, a wolf.

FIDDI

Where?

SLOAN

No way!

MONRO

(shows phone)

Camera trap down by the river.

SLOAN

(looking)

I never thought there'd be wolves in Kandota Township in my lifetime. Fantastic!

FIDDI

We're not used to charismatic megafauna in Texas.

MONRO

Guthrie was raped by a llama in Peru.

SLOAN

Yes, we know.

FIDDI

We love that story every time you tell it.

GUTHRIE

(appearing, passes out books)

Wolves! I had no idea!

MONRO

Now that we have internet, can we just see the movie instead? I have to grade papers.

FIDDI

Babbitt was cute.

GUTHRIE

This is one of my favorite parts. Carol's first meeting of the Thanatopsis, the ladies' study club, presided over this day by Mrs. Dawson--

(points to FIDDI who puts on a hat)

FIDDI

(reads)

"O Mrs. Kennicott, I'm in such a fix. I'm supposed to lead the discussion and I wondered would you come and help?"

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

"What poet do you take up today?"

FIDDI AS MRS LUKE DAWSON

"Why, the English ones."

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

"Not all of them?"

FIDDI AS MRS LUKE DAWSON

“W-why yes. We’re learning all of European Literature this year. The club gets such a nice magazine, Culture Hints, and we follow its programs. Last year our subject was Men and Women of the Bible, and next year we’ll probably take up Furnishings and China.”

SLOAN

(reads)

“On her way over Carol had decided to use the Thanatopsis as the tool with which to liberalize the town. Her enthusiasm became watery even before thirteen women resolutely removed their overshoes, sat down meatily, ate peppermints, dusted their fingers, folded their hands, composed their lower thoughts, and invited the naked muse of poetry to deliver her most improving message.”

FIDDI AS MRS LUKE DAWSON

“We will first have the pleasure of hearing Mrs. Warren on the subject of ‘Shakespeare and Milton.’”

MONRO AS MRS LEONARD WARREN

(adding a hat)

“Shakespeare was born in 1564 and died in 1616. He lived in London, England and Stratford-on-Avon, which many American tourists love to visit. Perhaps the best known of his plays is *The Merchant of Venice*, having a beautiful love story and a fine appreciation of a woman’s brains, which a woman’s club, even those who do not care to commit themselves on the question of suffrage, ought to appreciate.”

They laugh, in character.

MONRO AS MRS LEONARD WARREN

“I am sure that I for one, would love to be like Portia. The play is about a Jew named Shylock, and he didn’t want his daughter to marry a Venice gentleman named Antonio--”

SLOAN

(reads)

“Carol had warned herself not to be supercilious.”

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

“They think they’re doing Shakespeare a favor. They’re sure that they have culture salted and hung up.”

FIDDI AS MRS LUKE DAWSON

“Now we will have a discussion of the papers, and I am sure we shall all enjoy hearing from one who we hope to have as a new member, Mrs. Kennicott, who with her splendid literary training and all should be able to give us many pointers and--many helpful pointers.”

SLOAN

(reads)

“Carol was in a panic. How could she speak without hurting them?”

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

“The only thing in the way of suggestion--perhaps there are several poets not mentioned today whom it might be worth considering--Keats, for instance, and Matthew Arnold and Rossetti and Swinburne. Swinburne would be such a--well, that is, such a contrast to life as we all enjoy it in our beautiful Middle-west--”

SLOAN

(reading)

“She saw that Mrs. Leonard Warren was not with her. She captured her by innocently continuing:”

Lights fade on SLOAN.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

“Unless perhaps Swinburne tends to be, uh, more outspoken than you, than we really like. What do you think, Mrs. Warren?”

MONRO AS MRS LEONARD WARREN

“Why you’ve caught my very thoughts, Mrs. Kennicott. Of course I have never *read* Swinburne, but years ago, when he was in vogue, I remember Mr. Warren saying that Swinburne (or was it Oscar Wilde? But anyway:) he said that though many so-called intellectual people posed and pretended to find beauty in Swinburne, there can never be genuine beauty without the message from the heart.”

Lights fade quickly on all but GUTHRIE.

GUTHRIE

(reading)

“The membership committee retired to the sitting-room for three minutes and elected Carol a member. And she stopped being patronizing. She wanted to be one of them. It was they who would carry out her aspiration. Her campaign against village sloth was actually begun!”

Lights out on GUTHRIE and up on MONRO
and FIDDI looking at a STATUE OF
SINCLAIR LEWIS played by SLOAN.

MONRO

So this is pretty new.

FIDDI

(reading plaque)

Sinclair Lewis by Nick Christensen, installed July 1, 2019.

MONRO

They decided to depict him as a young man around the time he lived in Sauk Centre.
Look at that bow-tie!

FIDDI

(reading)

Apparently he read every book in the library before he graduated high school--

MONRO

Let's go in!

FIDDI

I hate libraries!

MONRO

Me, too, but don't tell Guthrie!

Lights out on STATUE as they approach the
librarian, CLARE DESPLINTER, played by
GUTHRIE.

FIDDI

Good afternoon.

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

Welcome to Sauk Center Public Library. You're Astor Ulrichson's relations.

MONRO

Uh...yes, it's that obvious?

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

Your visit will make the *Sauk Centre Herald*.

MONRO

We're not actually Astor's relatives--

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

You're Sloan and Guthrie's--

MONRO

Spouses.

FIDDI

Partners.

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

How is Astor?

MONRO

Still in the hospital--

FIDDI

Touch and go--

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

I'm so sorry.

MONRO

We are, too.

FIDDI

We'll tell Sloan and Guthrie.

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

We're all very fond of Astor. You want to see the Sinclair Lewis section?

FIDDI

That would be fulsome!

MONRO

How did you know?

GUTHRIE AS CLARE takes them to a different part of the library.

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

The books by Sinclair Lewis are over there, and the books about Sinclair Lewis are here with the biographies.

FIDDI

Letterman, CS Lewis, Sinclair Lewis, Lindbergh, Little Crow, Luther—

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

We share with several other libraries, so we don't always have everything. Have you seen the Boyhood Home?

MONRO

I did, once, years ago.

FIDDI

Drove by when we came into town.

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

Do make it your next stop. And the Sauk Center History Museum is right downstairs.
I'm Clare Desplinter, by the way.

MONRO

Monro.

FIDDI

Fiddi.

They walk to the other section.

MONRO

Guthrie's a librarian, too.

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

Out in California?

MONRO

For the Los Angeles Film Society.

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

How wonderful! And what do you do?

MONRO

I teach graphic design at an art college.

FIDDI

So many more titles than Guthrie mentioned.

MONRO

Guthrie only knows books that turned into movies.

FIDDI

Kingsblood Royal--

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

That's about a white doctor who finds out he's actually Black.

MONRO

Really?

FIDDI

Last night we watched *Dodsworth*. Lewis must've had a terrible marriage.

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

Two of them.

MONRO

You've read all of these?

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

No, sad to say. I started *Main Street*, but it dragged.

FIDDI

What kind of name is Desplinter? Guthrie and Sloan say everyone here is Scandinavian, but that sounds French.

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

Belgian, actually.

FIDDI AND MONRO

Ohhh.

FIDDI

You don't...speak Belgian, do you?

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

I do have a little Flemish, yes. *Hoe gaat het vandaag?* [How are you today?]

MONRO

No, thanks, we're driving.

FIDDI

(hits MONRO)

Whatever!

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

Beg pardon?

MONRO

(looking above)

Un bar aux Folies Bergère!

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

(glancing above)

Of course it's just a print. Caused no little fuss around here when we put it up.

MONRO

It's almost a hundred-fifty years old! Manet! How could anyone object?

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

There was an issue because the waitress is in a tavern.

MONRO

It's a seminal painting. Does the viewer actually appear in the painting in the mirror but at an impossible angle? The woman with the opera glasses in the background calls our attention to the act of viewing. And notice the feet of the acrobat dangling there, mostly out of frame. It's all about multiple perspectives, flawed points of view, distortion.

FIDDI

(reading)

Could you direct us to Minniemashie House? Or I guess Palmer House, in real life.

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

Where Sinclair Lewis worked as a teenager! Two blocks north on the Original Main Street.

Lights out on GUTHRIE AS CLARE and up on SLOAN AS HARRY, a young desk clerk for the Palmer House Hotel.

SLOAN AS HARRY

Oh, no, we don't mind answering questions about the hotel at all, even if you're not looking for a room. It's haunted, you know.

MONRO

By Sinclair Lewis?

SLOAN AS HARRY

A newlywed couple claimed to see a man in 1920s clothes at the foot of their bed, so who knows? That would be good, wouldn't it? Sposed to be a little kid people have seen coming down the stairs and hiding, a ball bouncing around, and some talk about a guy hanging himself in the bar.

FIDDI

Monro, let's go.

MONRO

Guthrie remembers having a grape Nehi here as a kid.

SLOAN AS HARRY

Rooms eleven and seventeen are considered most haunted. I could give you a peep.

FIDDI

(pulling MONRO out)

Sorry, we have to get back to the farm.

SLOAN AS HARRY

The basement's also seen some, you know, activity--!

Lights out on SLOAN AS HARRY.

MONRO

Fiddi--what--?

FIDDI

I'm not psychic or anything but sometimes I get bad feelings--I keep thinking about the curse--and I don't know if it was that guy or the hotel, but it was like chills and a little nausea--

MONRO

(stepping away)

Any other symptoms--?

FIDDI

No, I'm fine, now.

(hesitation from MONRO)

Fine!

Lights up on GUTHRIE with a copy of *Main Street*.

GUTHRIE

I really don't mind working remotely--the flexibility is fantastic--but I'm shitty at screen sharing and we're in the middle of acquiring a 2D Oscar Micheaux archive--

MONRO

Teaching a studio class online is impossible. Can I go home?

FIDDI

Put some nirus into it.

GUTHRIE

I don't think I could do this without you.
And the hospital says it won't be long.

FIDDI

That's so morbid. Can't they let us see Astor?

GUTHRIE

What good would it do?

MONRO

I've been afraid to screen share.

SLOAN

(appearing with fishing gear)

Screen-sharing's easy. I prefer working remotely. Only field work is better. A little technological expertise gives you an edge over fusty government bureaucrats.

GUTHRIE
Is that Astor's daredevil?

SLOAN
Uh, yeah.

GUTHRIE
It's been forever since I fished, and I only caught northerns on minnows, but I remember Astor always preferred daredevils.

SLOAN
And mice.

MONRO
Live mice?!

GUTHRIE
Lures.

SLOAN
(re: book)
I'm getting a presentation ready for tomorrow--do we have to do this now?

<p>GUTHRIE If we skip a day, we'll lose the thread. We can just read a little. I marked the page.</p>	<p>FIDDI (re: pile of hats and costume pieces) I got all these at the Step On In thrift store!</p>
---	--

FIDDI curates the partial costumes. They all pick up copies of the book.

GUTHRIE
Mrs. Bogart is Carol's elderly neighbor. Fiddi, will you narrate?

FIDDI
"Mrs. Bogart hitched her chair nearer. Her large face, with its disturbing collection of moles and lone black hairs, wrinkled cunningly. She showed her decayed teeth in a reproving smile, and in the confidential voice of one who scents stale bedroom scandal she breathed:"

GUTHRIE points to MONRO.

MONRO

Thanks.

GUTHRIE

Type-casting.

MONRO AS MRS BOGART

“I just don’t see how folks can talk and act like they do. I never pay no attention to stories, but I heard it right good and straight that Harry Haydock is carrying on with a girl that clerks in a store down in Minneapolis, and poor Juanita not knowing anything about it--and--and--then there’s that awful man Bjornstam that does chores, and Nat Hicks and--”

FIDDI

“There was, it seemed no person in town who was not living a life of shame except Mrs. Bogart, and naturally she resented it.”

MONRO AS MRS BOGART

“Another thing--Heaven knows I never want to start trouble, but I can’t help what I see from my back steps, and I notice your hired girl Bea carrying on with the grocery boys and all--”

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

“Mrs. Bogart! I’d trust Bea as I would myself!”

MONRO AS MRS BOGART

“Oh, dearie, you don’t understand me! I just hope none of these horrid young men around town will get her into trouble! There’s nothing can cure them except coming right to God and kneeling down like I do at prayer-meeting every Wednesday evening--”

FIDDI

(pointing, whispering)

Oh, wow, look!

SLOAN

A doe.

FIDDI

A deer!

GUTHRIE

A female deer.

(off their looks)

Sorry.

MONRO

And a fawn!

SLOAN

Never saw deer on the farm when we were kids.

GUTHRIE

Only domestic animals.

SLOAN

Tessie.

GUTHRIE

Oh, yeah, Tessie, so sad!

FIDDI

Who's Tessie?

SLOAN

Such a gentle dog!

GUTHRIE

I don't even want to think about that!

SLOAN

You could put your whole arm down her throat and she wouldn't bite.

GUTHRIE

(deliberately changing the subject)

Remember the last time Astor took Dad fishing?

SLOAN

Dad wouldn't shut up, just kept talking, cleaning his pipe--

GUTHRIE

Astor said he was scaring the fish--

MONRO

You really have some great memories of this place.

GUTHRIE

Astor herding cows with the tractor in fourth gear--

SLOAN

Remember camping in that pup tent by Boyer's woods--?

FIDDI

Sweet!

GUTHRIE

Catching frogs in the trash slough--

MONRO

Masturbating in the barn--

(off their look)

What? You said--

GUTHRIE

We met the Thanatopsis already, so I thought you should know the Jolly Seventeen--next page marked--I'll start as Carol tries to make her way with the smart set--

SLOAN

What's with the costumes?

FIDDI

You said you were getting into it.

SLOAN

Elmer Gantry was okay.

GUTHRIE

I can't believe it won so many Oscars with that melodramatic ending--

FIDDI

Yeah, why couldn't Sharon escape? She just dithers and whatever until it's too late.

GUTHRIE

--When the revival tent burns down.

SLOAN

It's a metaphor.

MONRO

Costumes are cool.

GUTHRIE

Nobody has to wear them, of course, but--

Off FIDDI's look, SLOAN dons a costume piece.

GUTHRIE

Great. Great! There are a lot of characters in this scene, so the thrift stores will help. Ready?

MONRO

Ready!

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

“I drove almost down to Wahkeenyan with Will, a few days ago. Do you all know that lonely Lutheran church, with the tin-covered spire, that stands out alone on a hill? It’s so bleak; somehow it seems so brave. I do think the Scandinavians are the hardiest and best people--”

GUTHRIE points to FIDDI.

FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK

“They’re simply *ghastly* hired girls! I don’t know what the country’s coming to, with these Scandahoofian clodhoppers demanding every cent you can save--”

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

“But isn’t it the fault of the mistresses if the maids are ungrateful? For generations we’ve given them the leavings of food, and holes to live in. I don’t want to boast, but I must say I don’t have much trouble with Bea. She’s so friendly. The Scandinavians are sturdy and honest--”

FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK

“Honest? Do you call it honest to hold us up for every cent of pay they can get?”

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

“How much do maids get here?”

(points to SLOAN)

SLOAN AS MRS JACKSON ELDER

“Any place from three-fifty to five-fifty a week! I know positively that Mrs. Clark, after swearing that she wouldn’t weaken and encourage them in their outrageous demands, went and paid five-fifty--think of it! *How much do you pay, Mrs. Kennicott?*”

ALL BUT GUTHRIE

“Yes! How much do you pay?”

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

“W-why, I pay six a week.”

They all gasp.

FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK

“Don’t you think it’s hard on the rest of us when you pay so much?”

They all glower at GUTHRIE AS CAROL.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

“A maid has one of the hardest jobs on earth. She works from ten to eighteen hours a day. She has to wash slimy dishes and dirty clothes. She tends the children and runs to the door with wet chapped hands and--”

FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK

“That’s all very well, but believe me, I do those things myself when I’m without a maid-- and that’s a good share of the time for a person that isn’t willing to pay exorbitant wages!”

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

“But a maid does it for strangers, and all she gets out of it is the pay--”
(points to FIDDI)

FIDDI

(reading)

“Their eyes were hostile. Four of them were talking at once.”

GUTHRIE points to SLOAN.

FIDDI

“Vida Sherwin’s dictatorial voice cut through, took control of the revolution.”

SLOAN AS VIDA SHERWIN

“Tut, tut, tut, tut! What angry passions--and what an idiotic discussion! Juanita, quit looking so belligerent. Carol, you stop admiring yourself as the Joan of Arc of the hired girls, or I’ll spank you. You come over here and talk libraries with Ethel Villets. Booooooo! If there’s any more pecking, I’ll take charge of the hen roost myself!”

They all laugh artificially.

FIDDI

“A small-town bungalow, the wives of a village doctor and a village dry-goods merchant, a provincial teacher, a colloquial brawl over paying a servant a dollar more a week. Yet this insignificance echoed cellar-plots and cabinet meetings and labor conferences in Persia and Prussia, Rome and Boston, and the orators who deemed themselves international leaders were but the raised voices of a billion Juanitas denouncing a million Carols, with a hundred thousand Vida Sherwins trying to shoo away the storm. Carol felt guilty. She devoted herself to admiring the spinsterish Miss Villets--”

GUTHRIE points to MONRO.

FIDDI

“--And immediately committed another offense against the laws of decency.”

MONRO AS ETHEL VILLETS

“We haven’t seen you at the library yet.”

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

“I’ve wanted to run in so much but I’ve been getting settled and--I’ll probably come in so often you’ll get tired of me! I hear you have such a nice library.”

MONRO AS ETHEL VILLETS

“There are many who like it. We have two thousand more books than Wakamin.”

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

“Isn’t that fine. I’m sure you are largely responsible. I’ve had some experience, in St. Paul.”

MONRO AS ETHEL VILLETS

“So I have been informed. Not that I entirely approve of library methods in these large cities. So careless, letting tramps and all sorts of dirty persons practically sleep in the reading-rooms.”

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

“I know, but the poor souls--Well, I’m sure you will agree with me in one thing: The chief task of a librarian is to get people to read.”

MONRO AS ETHEL VILLETS

“It may be all very well in cities, where they have unlimited funds, to let nasty children ruin books and just deliberately tear them up, and fresh young men take more books out than they are entitled to by the regulations, but I’m never going to permit it in this library!”

SLOAN

Whoa!

MONRO

When was this written?

FIDDI

(looking at copyright page)

1920.

GUTHRIE

What do you bet Sinclair Lewis was one of those fresh young men taking out more than his share of books?

MONRO

He must've been pretty funny.

GUTHRIE

Terrible drinker.

SLOAN

The book is actually really good.

MONRO

I'd like to know more about him.

FIDDI

I'm kinda getting into it.

GUTHRIE

We're only doing excerpts because it's a little repetitive: Carol gets an idea for reform and charges ahead, then gets shot down by hostility, smugness and apathy. I keep wishing she'd be smarter about it, plant seeds with potentially sympathetic individuals, build some consensus before unveiling her plans fully formed--

SLOAN

You have advice for a fictional character from a hundred years ago?

MONRO

But Sauk Centre hasn't changed, has it, in a hundred years?

GUTHRIE

[strange noise of affirmation]. That's my point!

SLOAN

Maybe try connecting to real people instead of a book--

MONRO

Or movies!

FIDDI

Real people like Clare.

GUTHRIE

Who's Clare?

FIDDI

The actual real nonfictional librarian--

MONRO

Yeah, pretty normal as Belgian librarians go--

GUTHRIE

Belgian?

Lights out on everyone but MONRO.

MONRO

The website is pretty primitive. The colors range from off-taupe to muted-bone, inspired, near as I can tell, by the clapboard palette of the Boyhood Home.

The primary--well, *only*--font is a modest knock-off of Palatino. There is one event featured, a Writer's Conference that was cancelled earlier this year with a promise of resurrection next season. I was thinking while we're here I might as well help with some volunteer graphic and web design, so I watched a little bit of the video about the postponed conference.

Lights out on MONRO and up on POET, played by FIDDI.

FIDDI AS POET

I'm mad for poetry. Have been for the last six decades. I'm passionate about truth, so I also write fiction. Unpublished currently, and maybe that's because I work so hard at truth. I don't intend to write comedy, but my honesty makes some people laugh, my poetic honesty. Gore Vidal told me my poems made him laugh. I'd like--if I may--to read you one of my poems--

Lights out on FIDDI AS POET and up on GUTHRIE AS WIM.

GUTHRIE AS WIM

Actually, I'm hoping we can talk today about highlighting ways Sinclair Lewis is still relevant. He won the Nobel Prize in 1930, turned down the Pulitzer, but is he being read these days? Do people consider him old-fashioned and obscure?

Lights up on MONRO AS NOVELIST.

MONRO AS NOVELIST

(shows first editions)

I don't find Lewis out-of-date at all--completely modern! But I'm a little prejudiced: these are all first editions. *Babbitt*, *Dodsworth*, *It Can't Happen Here*, *Arrowsmith*, which is relevant to what we're going through right now. Lewis wrote satire, throwing a harsh light on social issues, but I've done a wee bit of research--

GUTHRIE AS WIM

Hardly wee!

MONRO AS NOVELIST

Every one of his novels has a long section--sometimes excised by editors--that outlines how Lewis proposes to fix the problem he's addressing. I've prepared a PowerPoint--

Lights out on MONRO AS NOVELIST.

GUTHRIE AS WIM

Your father spoke at our first conference--and you've participated many times--

Lights up on SLOAN AS PLAYWRIGHT.

SLOAN AS PLAYWRIGHT

Many times.

GUTHRIE AS WIM

And he spoke at Lewis' funeral in Sauk Centre--

SLOAN AS PLAYWRIGHT

When they opened the urn to pour the cremains into the grave, a wind blew Lewis' ashes over the town and my father joked that he still found a way to escape Sauk Centre. We're related to the Lewis family through his stepmother Isabel Warner, which is one reason I'm writing a play about Lewis, well, mostly about *Main Street*, not an adaptation, a reaction after a hundred years, putting a lot of myself and my family into it--

Lights out on SLOAN AS PLAYWRIGHT.

GUTHRIE AS WIM

Of course, everyone agrees it wasn't the ashes escaping, just steam from the warm urn on a cold winter day.

Lights up on MONRO.

MONRO

How long have you been President of the Sinclair Lewis Association?

GUTHRIE AS WIM

Almost ten years. Astor was President for more than 25. They tell me Astor's--doing better--

MONRO

About the same, unfortunately. Thank you for asking.

GUTHRIE AS WIM

Tenacious, though. Don't count Astor out!

MONRO

Since we're in town as long as Astor's still...sick, and I was wondering if you could use any graphic design help.

GUTHRIE AS WIM

Oh, you bet! But I don't have any budget--

MONRO

Volunteer, no worries! I'm teaching online for the moment--

GUTHRIE AS WIM

Graphic design?

MONRO

The students are designing logos for wildlife conservation organizations--they're researching now, so I have a little extra time--

GUTHRIE AS WIM

How wonderful! Would you be willing to take a look at our website? And we want to redo this brochure--

(hands brochure to MONRO)

MONRO

When was this last done?

GUTHRIE AS WIM

Previous...millennium I think.

MONRO

I can definitely help.

GUTHRIE AS WIM

It needs a little--

MONRO

Pep? I'm gonna doll this up with as much advertising schmutz as I can pull out of my schmutzhole.

Lights out on them and up on SLOAN and
FIDDI AS DR SKLAR. Hospital sounds,
perhaps announcements.

FIDDI AS DR SKLAR

Astor's struggling, still fighting the good fight, not much change.

SLOAN

Still intubated? Unconscious?

FIDDI AS DR SKLAR

Blood oxygen is low again. It was good enough this morning that Astor was briefly off ventilation and conscious. We had a conversation, and when I mentioned you were here, Astor seemed a bit confused but asked me to give you this.

(hands SLOAN a set of keys)

SLOAN

Oh, we kinda already broke into the house. Listen, is it worthwhile for us to stay? We're working long distance, which is fine, but if we can go back to Texas, we'd prefer that. We should be here if Astor wakes up again, or dies, but...

FIDDI AS DR SKLAR

It could go either way at this point, given Astor's age and underlying conditions, but we should know more in a couple of days. I'm very sorry, but there's still hope.

Lights out on them and up on MONRO in bed
with GUTHRIE.

MONRO

We'd hardly ever need to go into town. Almost completely self-sustaining. The barn could be turned into a series of studios. The house could be a B&B for artists, a summer retreat, workshops, maybe a gallery--

GUTHRIE

A gallery? For the farmers to buy abstract paintings--

MONRO

It could be virtual as well--

GUTHRIE

--And the church ladies of Sauk Centre to invest in conceptual sculpture?

MONRO

We could have a reception or something here as a kind of preview to get the locals used to the idea.

GUTHRIE

A preview in the barn?

MONRO

We could hold Astor's wake in the barn!

GUTHRIE

Lutherans don't do wakes.

MONRO

Funeral reception then. A memorial gathering of some kind to honor Astor's legacy of returning the farm to nature but also creating a space for people...and art!

GUTHRIE

What happened at the Sinclair Lewis Association?

MONRO

I'm going redesign their brochure--

GUTHRIE

Go ahead, but don't get upset if they don't understand your work.

MONRO

It's just a brochure!

GUTHRIE

Oh, my god. We're living the book.

GUTHRIE touches MONRO under the covers.

MONRO

What do you mean?

GUTHRIE

Living *Main Street*!

MONRO

(re: touching)

Stop it.

GUTHRIE

(continues touching)

But the problems Lewis was critiquing have blown up, gone national--

MONRO

(struggling under the covers)

We're projecting, assuming--I'm the first one to harsh on the aesthetics, but the people are nice at least--

GUTHRIE

On the surface!

MONRO

--So much nicer than the conservative--
constructions--I imagined. That tickles--
stop!

GUTHRIE

You're constructing the people you want them to be, imagining them, costuming them--

MONRO

(wrestling with GUTHRIE)

Get that cankered bat claw out of there! You--mottled pluot! Get away from me, you sharpnose shiner!

Lights out on them and up on FIDDI.

FIDDI

(reading)

“Carol circled the outskirts of the town and viewed the slum of “Swede Hollow.” A family of recently arrived Finns were camped in an abandoned stable. A man of eighty was picking up lumps of coal along the railroad. At a gateless gate, a man in rough brown dogskin coat and black plush cap with lappets was watching her.”

Lights out on FIDDI and up on SLOAN more fully costumed as MILES BJORNSTAM.

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM

How do, Mrs. Kennicott.

Lights up on GUTHRIE AS CAROL, also more fully costumed.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

Oh, how do you do?

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM

My name’s Bjornstam. The Red Swede they call me. Remember? Always thought I’d kind of like to say howdy to you again.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

Y-yes--I’ve been exploring the outskirts of town.

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM

Yump. Fine mess. No sewage, no street cleaning, and the Lutheran minister and the priest represent the arts and sciences. Thank God, we don’t have to go and purr at Juanity Haydock at the Jolly Old Seventeen.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

Yes, even the Jolly Seventeen isn’t always so exciting. It’s very cold again today, isn’t it. Well--

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM

Maybe I hadn't ought to talk about Mrs. Haydock and her Solemcholy Seventeen in that fresh way. I'm the town badman, Mrs. Kennicott: everybody who doesn't love the bankers and the Grand Old Republican Party is an anarchist.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

You really are a curious person, Mr.--

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM

Bjornstam. Miles Bjornstam. Half Yank and half Swede. Usually known as that damn lazy big-mouthed calamity-howler that ain't satisfied with the way we run things.

Lights out on them and up on FIDDI in bed.

FIDDI

I'm enjoying these readings way more than I thought I would. I feel like I understand the characters more, too, sympathetic, even, especially for the characters I'm playing. I'm going back to the Thread Shed to get full costumes for us. The people in the book are like the people here now, honest and straightforward, nice-nice-nice with no pretension, not *pagyayabang* like everyone we know in Texas.

SLOAN joins FIDDI in bed, sullen.

FIDDI

Do you think Astor will leave the farm to you?

SLOAN

I doubt it.

FIDDI

You've got too much mansuetude.

SLOAN

Guthrie's got it sewn up with those weekly calls and that trip to Europe.

FIDDI

But you actually have more in common with Astor: hunting, fishing, nature.

SLOAN

I guess.

FIDDI

You should go fishing while we're here. I don't think Astor would mind if you used the tackle we found.

SLOAN

Astor *would* mind.

FIDDI

I wouldn't mind living here. It's peaceful--not cursed at all--and if I ever get a real job again, it could be remote. I can do project management from anywhere. For now I got part-time work at Fletcher's.

SLOAN

What? The bait shop?

FIDDI

Temporary for a few weeks. Or however long we stay. Hired this afternoon. Is that OK?

SLOAN

Sure, but it's a little...

FIDDI

Today I learned all about leeches.

SLOAN

OK.

FIDDI

You should come get some minnows and head over to Fairy Lake. The crappies are biting.

(looks at SLOAN)

What happened?

SLOAN

Screen share.

FIDDI

What?

SLOAN

I had a...uh...screen share incident in my big presentation. Everyone could see my last Google search.

FIDDI

What was it?

SLOAN shows phone to FIDDI.

FIDDI

(after a moment)

They're really nice at the bait shop. And they need a new minnow catcher.

Lights out on them and up on MONRO.

MONRO

The flavor is creamy and sweet but oniony, kind of shocking to see when you open it up, looks more biological than botanical, this pillowy membrane of white goo. But the look is nothing compared to the smell. There are signs up all over Thailand--no durian--it's illegal to eat it on public transportation or in a hotel. I didn't find the odor nearly as offensive as everyone warned me, but it is pretty powerful, not fecal exactly but not at all pleasant.

Lights up on FIDDI AS SIGGIE.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

Why would we stock that? It sounds just awful.

MONRO

I once watched a man eat a whole one by himself, spoonful after stinky spoonful.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

I'm trying to imagine Mrs. Sorenson giving it to her husband for breakfast.

MONRO

I know you don't have rambutan or dragonfruit. How about persimmons?

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

Maybe.

MONRO

Mangosteen?

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

What are they like?

MONRO

Delicious. Small, sweet and tart. Grow on trees in Southeast Asia.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

Nope. But have you tried:

(produces rhubarb stalks)

Rhubarb?

MONRO

What is that? Red celery?

(takes a bite)

Aaaagh!

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

Super-sour raw, but if you boil it in sugar it's wonderful. The leaves are actually poisonous and the stalks have a stringy celery texture. Take it. Free sample.

MONRO

Now that I bit into it!

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

I'm sorry it's not mangosteen, but it's about as exotic as we get.

MONRO

You just boil it in sugar? What proportions?

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

Do you have internet?

MONRO

Say...would you ever be interested in coming to an art reception on our farm?

Lights out on them and up on SLOAN and GUTHRIE fishing in a boat. They're using minnows and bobbers, so no casting.

GUTHRIE

I forgot how boring this is.

SLOAN

It's Zen.

GUTHRIE

At least there aren't any--[mosquito noise]

(slaps self)

Spoke too soon. Do you have--?

Silently, SLOAN sprays GUTHRIE with insect repellent, maybe even without looking at GUTHRIE.

GUTHRIE

A friend of mine has this theory about the Appalachians functioning as a genetic comb, and I'm wondering if it could apply to Plains States as well.

(illustrates using tackle)

As the US government encouraged emigration from the original thirteen states to secure western territories stolen from native tribes, poor people gradually moved into the foothills and then the Appalachians themselves. Those with ambition pressed on through the mountains and continued into Iowa and Minnesota where the land was flat and the soil rich. Their effort was rewarded and they prospered as they pioneered and persevered. But those without ambition were satisfied with the rocky soil and poor farms in the mountains, eking out a marginal existence eating squirrels because they lacked the wherewithal to keep moving, looking for something better. With Manifest Destiny pushing Americans toward the West Coast, did the Midwest serve as a second sieve where those satisfied with--well--

(gestures toward landscape)

--*This*--good for farming but somehow hasn't stimulated the creativity of say, Silicon Valley or Manhattan.

SLOAN

Shh.

GUTHRIE

Oh, right, the fish. I'm as bad as Dad.

SLOAN

Shhh!

Sound of a slamming door. Lights out on them and up on MONRO, terrified.

MONRO

Fiddi! Holy crap!

FIDDI

(appearing)

What?

MONRO

There's a bear!

FIDDI

(peering)

Where?

MONRO

Out by the bird feeder! I walked around the house and there it was! Standing up on its--

FIDDI

It's still there. That's a bear all right, *Ursus americanus*.
(leaves)

MONRO

In Yellowstone they can rip open a car trunk if they smell an ice chest full of food. This house is full of food!

FIDDI

(returning with rifle)

Yeah, us.

MONRO

You're not gonna shoot it?

FIDDI

Just scare it away.

(leaves)

MONRO

Or provoke it to attack! Don't!

(sound of door opening)

Don't open the door! I just baked dill bread!

Gunshot.

MONRO

Holy crap! Fiddi!

FIDDI

(returning)

Look at him run!

MONRO

Imagine him running *at* you!

FIDDI

(re: gun)

Fine, as long as I have this. I never shot a bear, but if it was self-defense--

MONRO

What have you shot?

Wild turkey, deer--
FIDDI

In Texas?
MONRO

A giant feral hog.
FIDDI

A hog?!
MONRO

Brobdingnagian.
FIDDI

But no wolves?
MONRO

Lights out on FIDDI and up on SLOAN AS
MILES BJORNSTAM, now fully costumed.
MONRO opens *Main Street*.

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM
“Well, well, well! Here’s old Miles, fresh as ever. Well say, that’s all right; he ain’t even begun to be cheeky yet; next summer he’s going to take you out on his horse-trading trip, clear into Idaho.”

MONRO
(narrating)
“Bjornstam had not finished his work at noon, and Carol invited him to have dinner with Bea in the kitchen. She wished that she were independent enough to dine with these her guests. She considered their friendliness, she sneered at “social distinctions,” she raged at her own taboos--and she continued to regard them as retainers and herself as a lady. She sat in the dining-room and listened.”

Lights up on FIDDI AS BEA, fully costumed,
who giggles.

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM
“I’ve had a lot of scapes--selling horses in a Montana mining camp--”

FIDDI AS BEA
“Oh my!”

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM

“Almost got myself killed breaking up a log jam in Idaho--”

FIDDI AS BEA

“Sure ya did!”

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM

“Then there was the time I distinguished myself being impertinent to a “two-fisted” millionaire lumberman.”

FIDDI AS BEA

“You yust watch yourself, Mr. Bjornstam!”

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM

“You’re a darn nice Swede girl. I guess if I had a woman like you I wouldn’t be such a sorehead.”

FIDDI AS BEA

“Your head’s not sore, yust too big and skvare!”

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM

“Gosh, your kitchen is clean; makes an old bach feel sloppy. “

FIDDI AS BEA

(shrugs)

“It’s my job.”

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM

“Say, that’s nice hair you got--”

(touches her hair, she pushes his hand away, giggling)

FIDDI AS BEA

“Now don’t get fresh!”

Handwrestling.

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM

“Saaay, girl, if I ever do get fresh, you’ll know it. Why, I could pick you up with one finger, and hold you in the air long enough to read Robert J. Ingersoll clean through.”

FIDDI AS BEA

“Who is dat?”

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM

“ He’s a religious writer. Sure, you’d like him fine.”

FIDDI AS BEA wins the handwrestling. They smile. Lights out on them.

MONRO

Bea and Miles Bjornstam were married in June. Miles had turned respectable. And at the first child-welfare week a year later, Dr. Kennicott awarded the prize for Best Baby not to decent parents but to Bea and Miles Bjornstam! The good matrons glared at sturdy little Olaf, with his blue eyes, his honey-colored hair, and magnificent back, and they remarked:

Lights up on FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK.

FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK

Well, Mrs. Kennicott, maybe that Swede brat is as healthy as your husband says he is, but let me tell you I hate to think of the future that awaits any boy with a hired girl for a mother and an awful irreligious socialist for a pa!

Lights out on FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK and MONRO and up on GUTHRIE still in the boat and on the phone.

GUTHRIE

Blood oxygen is what? Eighty-five? That's bad, isn't it? Can they increase--? And it should be over 95, is that right? Good, good. Oh, not so good. I see. Should we come to the hospital? OK, we won't rush over, but please let us know if anything changes.

(begins to cry)

Thank you so much for the update. You, too. No, I'm all right. Thanks.

Lights up on SLOAN in the boat, fishing, also crying quietly. They just cry for a little bit.

GUTHRIE

I'm sorry, I'm sorry--!

SLOAN

Not just...Astor...

GUTHRIE

Mom, I know...

SLOAN

Dad, too.

GUTHRIE

(considers)

You know, Monro was thinking the farm would make a good summer arts colony, with studios or performance space in the barn--

SLOAN

Yeah?

GUTHRIE

The house has four bedrooms--

(no response)

So it could function like a B&B--

(no response)

And the forest, sloughs and prairie could stay wild as Astor intended--

SLOAN

Your bobber.

GUTHRIE

You notice how quiet it is at night, just--

(makes insect or bird noises)

--No--

(traffic sounds or sirens)

--Like at home--peaceful and sweet like *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*--

SLOAN

Your bobber.

GUTHRIE

What?

SLOAN

Your bobber's been gone for at least a minute and you don't even notice--

GUTHRIE

(trying to set the hook)

I've been on the phone--

SLOAN

More than enough time to set the hook--he probably swallowed it by now--

GUTHRIE

(reeling)

Still on there--!

SLOAN
 You just sit there jabbering--

The fish is pulling hard.

GUTHRIE
 With the doctor!

SLOAN
 --About some goddamn art colony--

GUTHRIE
 Just an idea--

SLOAN
 --Nobody around here cares about--

GUTHRIE
 No, that's my point--friends would come from all over the country--so quiet--!

SLOAN
 Dame Judi Dench would come like in the goddamn movie? Not everything is a movie!
 You ever think maybe Fiddi and I would like to live here?

GUTHRIE
 Sure! You could run the arts--
 (off SLOAN'S look)
 --Okay, maybe not, but of course--

SLOAN
 I don't think so.

GUTHRIE
 Fiddi told us you lost your job.

SLOAN
 That's not why!

GUTHRIE
 Hey!

The fish suddenly pulls the entire rod from GUTHRIE's grip, out of the boat and into the lake with a splash. After a moment, SLOAN starts to laugh hysterically.

GUTHRIE is rigid, livid. Lights out on them and up on MONRO with luggage at reception in the Palmer House Hotel.

MONRO

(on the phone)

We'll pick it up later. Yes, it was a bit of a rush. Ask Sloan. I can't. Not right now, anyway, Guthrie's parking the car and apparently isn't ready to discuss--listen, I'll call you when I know more--and let me know what Sloan says--yes, they're all a little nuts in that Ulrichson kind of way--

GUTHRIE comes in with luggage.

MONRO

Gotta go--bye!

GUTHRIE

Who was that?

MONRO

Fiddi.

GUTHRIE

Did you--?

MONRO

What am I supposed to say?

GUTHRIE

Nothing yet. It's best we just let everybody cool down.

SLOAN AS HARRY appears in clothing from the early 1900s. In fact, HARRY looks exactly like the statue of Sinclair Lewis.

SLOAN AS HARRY

Sorry to keep you waiting--the regular night clerk is off tonight, and I'm thankful for the position, even temporarily! Welcome to the Palmer House Hotel.

MONRO and GUTHRIE look at each other, amazed.

SLOAN AS HARRY

A hotel--uuf!--a comfortless device--for comfort, so modern as to be destitute of that most ancient of things--the divine soul of God and man.

MONRO

He looks just like--!

SLOAN AS HARRY

Where the intellectual life--

GUTHRIE

The statue! I know!

SLOAN AS HARRY

--Is nearly nil--

SLOAN AS HARRY

--In an assorted assemblage of men who hasten to the cigar stand and to the bar on their arrival instead of to a bookcase.

GUTHRIE

Are you dressed for--an event--
Halloween?

SLOAN AS HARRY

And in this crowd of stupid well-dressed
plebians to be a servant--a slave--

MONRO

It's very well done--convincing--

SLOAN AS HARRY

--One expected to be an applauder of lewd
and childish stories--

MONRO

But we're being punked, aren't we?

SLOAN AS HARRY

--A welcomer of fools to fooldom, a quick prompt courteous attendant to those who are as slow, tardy and insolent in mind as in spirit, in fact to be a hotel clerk!

MONRO

Still want to stay here?

SLOAN AS HARRY

Away with this modern business life of
which hotel life is not the worst example.

GUTHRIE

Are you kidding? Of course!

SLOAN AS HARRY

A thinker, who acts, if not always wisely,
yet with a divine desire--

SLOAN AS HARRY

--To read books, to gaze on pictures, to wander through green fields and stately woods and by sapphire water, ever thinking and progressing ever to the divine purity! Now: How may I assist you? We're uncommonly busy this evening, only one room remains--number seventeen.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

GUTHRIE AS CAROL, MONRO AS RAYMIE
WUTHERSPOON, SLOAN AS VIDA
SHERWIN and FIDDI AS JUANITA
HAYDOCK all fully costumed.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

Have you any ideas about what play we'd better give first?

SLOAN AS VIDA SHERWIN

I've brought something that I think would be awfully jolly.
(gives CAROL the script)

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

'McGinerty's Mother-in-law'? But this is--this is--why, it's just a--Why, Vida, I thought you appreciated--well--appreciated art.

SLOAN AS VIDA SHERWIN

(snorts)

Oh. Art. Oh yes. I do like art. It's very nice. But the thing that matters is: what are we going to do with the money, if we make any?

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

Oh, but Vida dear, do forgive me but this farce--Now what I'd like us to give is something distinguished. Say Shaw's 'Androcles.' Have any of you read it?

MONRO AS RAYMIE WUTHERSPOON

I have. I read through all the plays in the public library, so's to be ready for this meeting. I don't believe you grasp the irreligious ideas in this 'Androcles,' Mrs. Kennicott. I guess the feminine mind is too innocent to understand all these immoral writers. Now I've found a play that is clean, and there's some awfully funny scenes in it, too. It's called 'His Mother's Heart,' and it's about a young man in college who gets in with a lot of free-thinkers and boozers and everything, but in the end his mother's influence--

FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK

Oh rats, Raymie! Can the mother's influence! I say let's give something with some class to it. I bet we could get the rights to 'The Girl from Kankakee,' and that's a real show. It ran for eleven months in New York!

SLOAN AS VIDA SHERWIN

That would be lots of fun, if it wouldn't cost too much.

FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK

What we want in a play is humor and pep. There's where American playwrights put it all over these darn old European glooms!

Lights out on everyone but GUTHRIE AS
CAROL.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

(increasingly defeated)

I disliked 'The Girl from Kankakee' even more than I'd expected. It narrated the success of a farm-lassie in clearing her brother of a charge of forgery. She became secretary to a New York millionaire and social counselor to his wife; and after a well-conceived speech on the discomfort of having money, she married his son. There was also a humorous office boy. Both Juanita Haydock and Ella Stowbody wanted the lead. I let Juanita have it.

Lights up on FIDDI AS DR SKLAR, then
fading up on SLOAN and GUTHRIE.

FIDDI AS DR SKLAR

It's a little bit of a miracle, if one can believe in miracles these days. Astor was hypoxic for about 36 hours, but the oxygen level's been in the normal range since Tuesday. We've had three episodes of consciousness, and it's possible we'll be able to take Astor off the ventilator soon.

GUTHRIE

That's incredible!

SLOAN

Would Astor be able to speak?

FIDDI AS DR SKLAR

Very likely, although the ventilator sometimes leaves the vocal cords a little hoarse. And I noticed some memory issues.

SLOAN

Short-term or long-term?

GUTHRIE

It really is like a miracle. Could we speak to Astor right away?

FIDDI AS DR SKLAR

I'll text you when Astor's fully conscious. Keep in mind it's still touch-and-go. Things could go either way at this point.

Lights out on FIDDI AS DR SKLAR and SLOAN and up on MONRO getting ready for bed.

MONRO

You have to get in there right away.

GUTHRIE also gets ready for bed, looking at phone.

GUTHRIE

And say what?

MONRO

Make the case for turning the farm into an arts colony.

GUTHRIE

That's not Astor's plan.

MONRO

Make it Astor's plan. Maybe instead of a memorial, we could do a vigil to help Astor pull through.

GUTHRIE

I don't think they do vigils here.

MONRO

Respectful and beautiful with candles. Everyone would come because they love Astor.

GUTHRIE

I'm not sure everyone loves Astor. They're polite about Astor.

MONRO

They'd be obligated in any case.

GUTHRIE

It just feels--

(creepy noise)

--To have actual *tactics*....

MONRO

Another would be persuading Sloan and Fiddi *not* to want the farm.

GUTHRIE

How?

MONRO

Fiddi has no idea how racistsexisthomophobic the people are here.

GUTHRIE

Fiddi's getting to know the customers at the bait shop.

MONRO

The farm is your legacy.

GUTHRIE

Also Sloan's.

MONRO

(shows Bible)

Look.

GUTHRIE

Where'd you get that?

MONRO

On Astor's desk.

GUTHRIE

As long as we're going through all Astor's private shit, why not?

MONRO

We're learning who Astor was.

GUTHRIE

Is.

MONRO

Anyway, this is your shit. Your ancestry--

(shows page as lights fade on them)

Here's the whole Swedish line going to back to Nils Ulrichson begat by Ulrich Svenson begat by Sven Troedson begat by Troed Svenson begat by Sven Troedson--

Lights out on MONRO and up on FIDDI
whispering with GUTHRIE in church voices.

GUTHRIE

This is the church where our dad was baptized. Used to be Norwegian, then part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America until the ELCA accepted LGBTQ clergy. They voted themselves out a few months later.

FIDDI

I wouldn't mind being buried in a quiet green place like this, nobody but birds and butterflies visiting most days.

GUTHRIE

I used to feel that way, but since they left the ELCA, I'd rather be cremated and scattered.

FIDDI

Like Sinclair Lewis?

GUTHRIE

Scattered anywhere but here! By the way, how's Sloan?

FIDDI

Good. How's the Palmer House?

GUTHRIE

Oh! Lemme tell you--!

Lights up on SLOAN AS CLARENCE
ANDERSON, an elderly minister preaching.

SLOAN AS CLARENCE ANDERSON

The Papists claim there's but one sin against the Holy Spirit, the unforgivable sin of blasphemy, but in fact there are many more unforgivable sins against the Holy Spirit, seventy-seven of them, all told.

GUTHRIE

Oh, no.

SLOAN AS CLARENCE ANDERSON

Number two is abortion, the taking of innocent life!

GUTHRIE

Do you want to stay?

SLOAN AS CLARENCE ANDERSON

Sexual perversion, as condemned in both the Old and New Testaments!!

FIDDI

It would be rude to just walk out--

SLOAN AS CLARENCE ANDERSON

These transvestites who think God made a mistake with their genitalia!

GUTHRIE

Aw, jeez.

SLOAN AS CLARENCE ANDERSON

Miscegenation!

SLOAN AS CLARENCE ANDERSON

Premarital sexual relations are unlawful and a great sin!

GUTHRIE

Actually, it's important that you see this.

SLOAN AS CLARENCE ANDERSON

Denying the truth of the Bible!

FIDDI

Why?

SLOAN AS CLARENCE ANDERSON

Some misguided sinners believe in universal salvation, which is a terrible lie of the Devil.

GUTHRIE

Country church, small town church--tells you a lot about how people think here.

SLOAN AS CLARENCE ANDERSON

Economic status of women--neglecting their children and their husbands to work outside the home.

GUTHRIE

Maybe we should go.

SLOAN AS CLARENCE ANDERSON

Governments that deny our God-given right to bear arms and defend ourselves!

FIDDI

Don't let him get to you.

SLOAN AS CLARENCE ANDERSON

The Theory of Evolution that calls God's children--

GUTHRIE

Could you imagine living among these people day-to-day? Hearing this every Sunday? Knowing these lies are fermenting in the tiny brains of everyone around you?

SLOAN AS CLARENCE ANDERSON

--Created in his own image--nothing but a bunch of monkeys! Vegetarianism! Spiritualism, with seances summoning Satan and his minions!

SLOAN AS CLARENCE ANDERSON

And finally, most offensive to the Holy Spirit of all these terrible sins: books! Yes, brethren, novels and self-improvement manuals and biographies of worldly folks--all of these are tools of Satan, written by heretical, atheistic authors to distract us from the one Book!

(holds up Bible, perhaps upside-down)

The Holy Word of God! The only Book you will ever need!

Lights out on SLOAN AS CLARENCE
ANDERSON.

FIDDI

Mesmeric.

GUTHRIE

Let's get out of here quick in case he's greeting people at the door.

MONRO AS MRS BOGART appears next to
them.

MONRO AS MRS BOGART

Pastor Anderson is a guest preacher all the way from Fergus Falls and we're lucky to have him.

FIDDI

Which sin is your favorite?

GUTHRIE

Fiddi--

MONRO AS MRS BOGART

I'm glad Pastor spoke so forcefully about the occult. Earlier this year the high school tried to put on a play called *Blithe Spirit*--

FIDDI

By Noel Coward?

GUTHRIE

From the 1940s?

MONRO AS MRS BOGART

A few of the ladies got wind of it and called the principal.

FIDDI

And what happened?

GUTHRIE

Let's go!

MONRO AS MRS BOGART

Let's just say that misguided drama teacher is currently seeking employment in South Dakota. I'll give you the details at coffee hour.

(disappears, dragging FIDDI)

GUTHRIE

No, Fiddi--!

SLOAN AS CLARENCE ANDERSON

(appearing)

God bless you. Thank you for coming today.

GUTHRIE

We were just leaving--so sorry--

SLOAN AS CLARENCE ANDERSON

Where are you visiting from?

GUTHRIE

Los Angeles.

SLOAN AS CLARENCE ANDERSON

Los Angeles! That's a big, sinful city!

Lights out on them and up on FIDDI fully
costumed as JUANITA HAYDOCK.

FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK

Oh, have you folks heard about this young fellow that's just come to town that the boys call 'Elizabeth'? I bet he doesn't make eighteen a week in Nat Hicks' tailor shop, but my! Isn't he the perfect lady though! He talks so refined, and oh, the lugs he puts on-- belted coat, and pique collar with a gold pin, and socks to match his necktie, and honest-- you won't believe this, he said he didn't find any intellectual companionship in this town. Can you *beat* it? And him a Swede tailor!

Lights out on FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK
and up on SLOAN AS HARRY, narrating.

SLOAN AS HARRY

The Jolly Seventeen laughed, and Carol laughed with them. Mrs. Jack Elder added that this Erik Valborg had confided to Mrs. Gurrey that he would "love to design clothes for women." Mrs. Gougerling had a good look at this Valborg fellow. He was wearing the awfulest mollycoddle clothes, with the waist pinched in like a girl's. He was sitting on a rock doing nothing, but when he heard the Gougerling car coming 'Elizabeth' snatched a book out of his pocket, and as they went by he pretended to be reading it, to show off.

Carol decided that sometime she really must go out of her way to pass Hicks's shop and see this freak.

Lights out on SLOAN AS HARRY and up on
GUTHRIE, FIDDI and MONRO.

See? See?
GUTHRIE

I guess.
FIDDI

It's obvious! "Elizabeth," wanting to design clothes for women--
GUTHRIE

Waist pinched in like a girl's--
MONRO

Exactly!
GUTHRIE
FIDDI
(noting in phone)
Mollycoddle.

Flowers, music, poetry--
MONRO

Effeminacy isn't necessarily queer or whatever--
FIDDI
(leaving)
Anyone want anything?

In those days it was--that was all they had back then--markers, cliches--
GUTHRIE

But Lewis wasn't gay, was he?
MONRO

He was married twice and carried on with a much younger woman--
GUTHRIE

Carried on?
MONRO

Jeez, I'm starting to sound like I belong here--
GUTHRIE

SLOAN
(appearing)

You think everybody's gay.

GUTHRIE

No, just obviously gay people. Dad, Astor--

SLOAN

What happens to this character later in the novel? Gay things?

GUTHRIE

Ultimately, he becomes a professional actor.

They consider this.

SLOAN

Not necessarily gay.

GUTHRIE

Raymie Wutherspoon also seems gay to me. Acting in the play, so good to his mama--

MONRO

Sings bird songs, longs for "self expression"--

SLOAN

Too bad you can't ask Sinclair Lewis.

MONRO and GUTHRIE look at each other.
Lights out on GUTHRIE and SLOAN.
MONRO is in the produce section with a
Tupperware container talking to FIDDI AS
SIGGIE.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

You actually made it?

MONRO

Wasn't hard. Now that we have internet. This is for you.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

(takes the Tupperware)

My grandmother's was better.

MONRO
 You haven't even tried it.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE
 Right now?

MONRO
 (hands spoon)
 Unless you can't eat on the job.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE
 (opening Tupperware)
 I'll tell my boss it's quality control research.

MONRO
 Any rambutan come in?

FIDDI AS SIGGIE
 Nope.
 (tastes)

MONRO
 Mangosteen?

FIDDI AS SIGGIE
 Nope. This is good.

MONRO
 I added just a touch of--

FIDDI AS SIGGIE AND MONRO
 Cinnamon.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE
 My grandma did that, too.

MONRO
 Starfruit? Jackfruit?

FIDDI AS SIGGIE
 (eating)
 Mmmm.

MONRO
 Breadfruit?

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

Hold on.

(leaves)

MONRO

Damn. Sorry. I didn't mean to--

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

(returning with a pint of ice cream)

Vanilla and rhubarb are the best.

Lights out on them and up on SLOAN AS HARRY sitting at the bar in the Palmer House Hotel. He seems perhaps as much as a generation older than he did previously, dressed prosperously and starting to get in his cups. GUTHRIE appears with two highballs and sits down.

GUTHRIE

I have to say this is a great honor.

SLOAN AS HARRY

You're not from here.

GUTHRIE

No, but my father was. I'm a little mystified as to what you're doing here, however.

SLOAN AS HARRY

My father's funeral was today.

GUTHRIE

My sympathies.

SLOAN AS HARRY

He never quite approved of me. I based a character on him as a kind of tribute and he took it as an insult.

GUTHRIE

Will Kennicott.

SLOAN AS HARRY

You've read *Main Street*? Of course, everyone here's read it. Did you like it or do you resent it, too?

GUTHRIE

I'm re-reading it, actually.

SLOAN AS HARRY

Encore!

GUTHRIE

What are you working on now?

SLOAN AS HARRY

I'm keen as mustard on the next one--been studying preachers, evangelists, traveling all over with some of the most prominent goddamn scoundrels in the land--Kansas City, Los Angeles with horny Sister Aimee--

GUTHRIE

I live practically around the corner from Angelus Temple!

SLOAN AS HARRY

Been arguing with my son of a bitch publisher about the title--
(imitates publisher)

Hal, you can't call it *Sounding Brass*--Ethel Mannin just published under that title in England--

(himself)

Well, far be it from me to scoop my esteemed British colleague--what about *The Salesman of Salvation*?

(publisher)

That's a bit of a cliché by now, isn't it?

(himself)

A cliché say thee, Alfred? Very well, I can just name it after the main character like I did with *Babbitt* and *Arrowsmith*--

GUTHRIE

And *Dodsworth*!

SLOAN AS HARRY

The character's named Elmer Bloor, and Alfred said:

(publisher)

That's too ugly, too scornful--it prejudices the reader too early--

(himself)

Mustn't prejudice the reader, Alfred! I'll just change his name. What do you think of Myron Mellish?

(publisher)

My dear Hal, that's the name of a real minister!

(himself)

I can keep Elmer, but it needs a brisk, sharp sound--

GUTHRIE

Gantry!

SLOAN AS HARRY

What?

GUTHRIE

Elmer Gantry! Trust me. It could win an Academy Award.

SLOAN AS HARRY

What's an Academy Award?

Lights out on SLOAN AS HARRY and
GUTHRIE, and up on FIDDI AS ERIK
VALBORG, fully costumed.

FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG

I've been rushing from picture to picture, like a kid let loose in an art gallery for the first time. You see, it's so awful recent that I've found there was a world--well, a world where beautiful things counted. I never read a novel till I got 'Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall' out of the library. I thought it was the loveliest thing in the world! Look here! Shall I get out of this tailoring, this pressing and repairing?

Lights up on GUTHRIE AS CAROL, fully
costumed.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

I don't see why a surgeon should spend very much time cobbling shoes.

FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG

But what if I find I can't really draw and design? After fussing around in New York or Chicago, I'd feel like a fool if I had to go back to work in a gents' furnishings store!

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

Please say 'haberdashery.'

FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG

Haberdashery? All right. I'll remember.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

What if you do have to go back? Most of us do! We can't all be artists--myself for instance. Don't be too meek toward life! Go. You're young, you're unmarried. Try everything! You're still a blessed innocent. Go and play till the Good People capture you!

FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG

Why aren't you happy with your husband?

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

I--you--

FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG

He doesn't care for the 'blessed innocent' part of you, does he?

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

Erik, you mustn't--

FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG

First you tell me to go and be free, and then you say that I mustn't!

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

I know. But you mustn't--You must be more impersonal!

FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG

You're younger than I am. Your lips are for songs about rivers in the morning and lakes at twilight. I don't see how anybody could ever hurt you.

Lights out on FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG and
up on SLOAN AS HARRY, drink in hand.

SLOAN AS HARRY

As Carol dusted the living-room, mended a collar-band, she was picturing herself and a young artist--an Apollo nameless and evasive--building a house in the Berkshires or in Virginia; exuberantly buying a chair with his first check; reading poetry together. In panic she insisted on being attentive to Kennicott, when he wanted to be left alone to read the newspaper. Carol went hastily up to her room, to her mirror.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL regards herself in a
mirror.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

I have become a small-town woman. Absolute. Typical. Modest and moral and safe. Protected from life. Genteel! The Village Virus--the village virtuousness. My hair--just scrambled together. What can Erik see in that wedded spinster there? He does like me! Because I'm the only woman who's decent to him!

Lights out on SLOAN AS HARRY. GUTHRIE starts removing some of the CAROL costume pieces, getting ready for bed. Lights up on MONRO, already in bed.

MONRO

What do you think of a sculpture park?

GUTHRIE

On the farm?

MONRO

Like Storm King or the Stark Sculpture Garden at the Getty. Along with the art colony B&B.

GUTHRIE

Isn't that at odds with Astor's vision of nature?

MONRO

Not at all! Completely integrated with nature--earthworks, commentary on climate change--

GUTHRIE

Hard to sell the locals on that.

MONRO

We can work that into the memorial or reception.

GUTHRIE

How?

Lights up on SLOAN AS HARRY, sipping his cocktail, narrating. He appears much older than previously, face ravaged by primitive skin treatments.

MONRO

It could be super-conceptual and interactive--the candles would foreshadow the more concrete sculptural--

SLOAN AS HARRY

The room was drab-colored and ill-ventilated--

GUTHRIE

Astor isn't dead!

SLOAN AS HARRY

The stale air seemed never to change. In the light from the hall, they were two lumps of bedclothes with shoulders and tousled heads attached.

MONRO

Okay, vigil then if Astor's still alive! Picture the barn, all cleaned out, opened up, lots of light, some temporary sculptures, found objects--we could commission friends to put some interesting works together--

Still dressed partially as CAROL, GUTHRIE gets in bed with MONRO and starts making weird noises and touching MONRO.

GUTHRIE

No one would come.

SLOAN AS HARRY

Guthrie began the time-honored and sacrosanct ritual of exaggerated sexual desire.

MONRO

If we serve food, they'll come. And they'll be dying to get in the house Astor never opens--

SLOAN AS HARRY

Knowing that if push came to shove, no push would come to shove.

GUTHRIE

Hide the arsenal--

SLOAN AS HARRY

Confident this show of affection would suffice to provoke a reaction of faux outrage.

MONRO

And what those weirdos from California and Texas are up to--stop that--you alluvial pingding!

SLOAN AS HARRY

That passes for passion between couples--

GUTHRIE

We'd have to convince Sloan and Fiddi.

SLOAN AS HARRY

Whose ancient marital landscape resembles the Atacama much more than the Amazon.

MONRO

We have as much right to host something there--you sebaceous cyst-sucking ringtailed lemur--!

SLOAN AS HARRY

Guthrie suddenly saw the foot-board of the bed as the foot-stone of the grave of love.

Suddenly conscious of SLOAN AS HARRY, GUTHRIE looks at him. MONRO doesn't notice.

GUTHRIE

Are you...narrating?!

SLOAN AS HARRY looks shocked at being caught. Lights up on FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG.

FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG

The tailor shop in Minneapolis was awful, the steam and the heat, the drudgery, the unremitting boredom, the men in darned vests and crumpled trousers who played what they thought very quite hilarious jokes on me. But I didn't mind, because I could go to the Art Institute and the Walker Gallery, and tramp clear around Lake Harriet, or hike out to the Gates house and imagine it was a chateau in Italy and I lived in it.

GUTHRIE

Why are you telling me this?

FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG

I know what you think of me.

GUTHRIE

I don't know who you are.

FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG

Erik Valborg--

(lamely)

The tailor.

GUTHRIE

Ohhhh!

FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG

I wish I wasn't a tailor, but that's it for now anyways. But I'm not what you said.

GUTHRIE

(with a glance at SLOAN AS HARRY)

You're not my first hallucination!

FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG

I've read *Die Homosexualität des Mannes und Weibes* by Magnus Hirschfeld and it doesn't apply to me, no matter what you think.

GUTHRIE

I didn't--I mean, you can't--! You read German? I thought you were Swedish.

Lights out on them and up on MONRO AS WILL KENNICOTT. SLOAN AS HARRY continues observing...and drinking.

MONRO AS WILL KENNICOTT

Well, Carrie, I'm not going to do the outraged husband stunt. I like you and I respect you, and I'd probably look like a boob if I tried to be dramatic. But I think it's about time for you and Valborg to call a halt before you get in Dutch.

Lights up on GUTHRIE AS CAROL, horrified.

MONRO AS WILL KENNICOTT

He isn't a bad sort. He's a young Swede farmer who likes to gas about books. But if Ma Bogart and a few others got started they'd drive you up a tree, and you'd find yourself so well advertised as being in love with this Valborg fellow that you'd *have* to be, just to spite 'em.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

I want you to know that I was going to tell you everything, tonight.

MONRO AS WILL KENNICOTT

Well, I don't suppose there's really much to tell.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

I'm fond of Erik. He appeals to something in here. And I admire him. He isn't just a young Swede farmer. He's an artist--

MONRO AS WILL KENNICOTT

Has he done one first-class picture or--sketch, d'you call it? Suppose the best he ever does is tailoring in some bum shack, pressing pants, or stooped over sewing, cranky from hard work and hinting around that if it hadn't been for you, he'd of gone East and been a great artist!

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

(crying)

Please! Not any more!

MONRO AS WILL KENNICOTT

Oh, honey, am I so bad? Can't you like me at all? I've--I've been so fond of you!

Lights fade on GUTHRIE AS CAROL and MONRO AS WILL KENNICOTT enacting SLOAN AS HARRY'S narration.

SLOAN AS HARRY

He kissed her lightly and slipped away. For an hour she heard him moving about his room, lighting a cigar, drumming with his knuckles on a chair. She felt that he was a bulwark between her and the darkness that grew thicker as the delayed storm came down in sleet.

(takes a drink)

Guthrie became increasingly disturbed by the increasingly random appearances of Sinclair Lewis, and struggled with whether to probe the origin of these visions with Monro, who seemed to take no notice of the author showing up at the foot of their bed more than seventy years after his burial in Greenwood Cemetery.

(pours two drinks)

On a hunch, Guthrie crept downstairs to the hotel bar--

GUTHRIE appears.

SLOAN AS HARRY

And was only mildly surprised to find Lewis in communion with a pair of shot glasses and a bottle of--

(consults label)

--Respectable scotch.

(raises a glass to GUTHRIE)

To your mental health.

(gestures for GUTHRIE to sit)

GUTHRIE

Only if the omniscient third person stops.

SLOAN AS HARRY signs zipping his lip.

GUTHRIE sits and takes the drink SLOAN AS HARRY pours.

SLOAN AS HARRY

As a man nears the end of his sorry life--

GUTHRIE

You won the Nobel Prize for Literature!

SLOAN AS HARRY

(drinks)

--He quite naturally becomes preoccupied with religion, even if he's achieved a hard-won intellectual atheism. So many choices--a faith smorgasbord as your Scandinavian forebears would say.

(elucidating with glass)

It's too late to consider Presbyterianism, which posits a merciless God who long ago foreordained most of the helpless human race to an eternal hell.

(the other glass)

Shall I become a Baptist, and argue over the merits of cold-water immersion?

(the bottle)

Methodism? A thunder-and-lightning religion--all profession and noise as I elucidated in *Elmer Gantry*.

Having run out of illustration items, SLOAN AS HARRY looks around. GUTHRIE helpfully provides a coaster as SLOAN AS HARRY becomes drunker.

SLOAN AS HARRY

The Congregationalists are so off-putting with their self-conscious true-goodness.

(GUTHRIE provides a swizzle stick)

Unitarianism seems all doubt, doubting even itself.

(GUTHRIE provides a straw)

And Lutherans, well, you see what a mess they've gotten us into right here in Sauk Centre, with their insistence on propriety over compassion or any other virtue.

(GUTHRIE provides a salt shaker)

But all Protestant sects are certain of one thing, and that is their united hatred of Catholicism, which returns with interest this animosity. It haughtily declares itself the only true Church, and that its chief prelate is infallible. Of course I've left out Mormonism, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and other exotics, but *in toto* religion will be the end of us because I believe the shot glass and you believe the swizzle. All this obsession with sin, with the afterlife, and no attention whatsoever to the real problems of the world! If you're looking for sin, that's the most egregious one there is, the one that'll do us in and leave the world a wilderness ruled by bears and wolves!

Lights out on SLOAN AS HARRY and up on FIDDI AS DR. SKLAR.

FIDDI AS DR SKLAR

Astor's been off the ventilator for almost seven hours and seems to be breathing just fine. Powerful will to live, which actually does have an effect on the immune system and the body's ability to fight inflammation.

GUTHRIE

Can Astor speak?

FIDDI AS DR SKLAR

Oh, yes! Ohhhh, yes.

GUTHRIE

What does that mean?

FIDDI AS DR SKLAR

It's pretty irritating to have a ventilator shoved down your throat for several weeks, and there's definitely some memory loss, which should be temporary. I wouldn't discuss anything important just yet.

GUTHRIE

Got it, thanks!

Lights out on FIDDI AS DR SKLAR and up on
MONRO AS ASTOR in a bed or chair.

GUTHRIE

So wonderful to see you!

MONRO AS ASTOR

(voice a little scratchy)

Likewise. Thank...thank you for coming.

GUTHRIE

Oh, we had to!

MONRO AS ASTOR

We?

GUTHRIE

Monro, too.

MONRO AS ASTOR

Right. Monro.

GUTHRIE

And Sloan and Fiddi. We've been so worried!

MONRO AS ASTOR

Nump. Still breathing.

GUTHRIE

Do you need anything?

MONRO AS ASTOR

How's the farm?

GUTHRIE

Good! Good. Sloan and Fiddi are staying there.

MONRO AS ASTOR

Where are you?

GUTHRIE

In town. Palmer House. It really is haunted!

MONRO AS ASTOR

You've been bored?

GUTHRIE

Not at all! I took the opportunity to introduce everybody to the oeuvre of Sinclair Lewis. We've watched all the movies and are reading *Main Street* aloud. Kind of as a tribute to you and your history with the Sinclair Lewis Association.

MONRO AS ASTOR

You've been bored.

GUTHRIE

But now you're coming home and we'll have--

MONRO AS ASTOR

What?

GUTHRIE

We'll have...a really nice dinner for you. All of us will cook!

MONRO AS ASTOR

You and Mmmmm--?

GUTHRIE

Monro. Well, not me so much, but Fiddi and Monro are great chefs--

MONRO AS ASTOR

In my kitchen?

GUTHRIE

And Sloan caught some nice walleyes at Fairy Lake.

Lights out on GUTHRIE and up on SLOAN.
MONRO AS ASTOR seems slightly stronger.

MONRO AS ASTOR

With my Fenwicks Elite?

Guthrie's very obedient. SLOAN

What does that mean? MONRO AS ASTOR

Calling you every week. SLOAN

Guthrie doesn't do that. *You* call me every week. MONRO AS ASTOR

No--Guthrie-- SLOAN

At 10:30 on Sundays. I appreciate it. Guthrie didn't help me plant those trees. MONRO AS ASTOR

Do you remember finding Tessie with us in the woods? SLOAN

Who's Tessie? MONRO AS ASTOR

A dog--on the farm-- SLOAN

Guthrie doesn't care about the farm. MONRO AS ASTOR

Wants to turn it into an arts colony. SLOAN

I see. MONRO AS ASTOR

A modern Carol Kennicott, always improving other people-- SLOAN

Is Wim here? MONRO AS ASTOR

Right outside-- SLOAN

MONRO AS ASTOR

I need to speak to my lawyer.

SLOAN

Shall I--?

MONRO AS ASTOR

We never had dogs on the farm. Only cats.

Lights out on them and up on GUTHRIE AS
CAROL and FIDDI AS BEA, who is collapsed
in a chair.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

Bea, you and Olaf don't look at all well. What's the matter?

FIDDI AS BEA

Oh, Bjornstam vorries so! I'm hot and dissy only. I yust sit a vile and I be fine.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

But poor little Olaf's burning up and tossing and turning in bed!

FIDDI AS BEA

His poor stomach's out of vwack.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

I'm calling Dr. Kennicott at once.

FIDDI AS BEA

Oh, no! The doctor doesn't like us, don't you know. He tinks you come down to Swede
Hollow too much.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

Bea, that's not so! Have you been eating something bad for you?

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM

(appearing)

Might be bum water. We used to get our water at Oscar Eklund's place, over across the
street, but Oscar kept dinging at me, and hinting I was a tightwad not to dig a well of my
own. So I starts getting water down at Mrs. Faberos's, in the hollow there, and I don't
believe it's real good.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

I'm getting Will, but it looks to me like typhoid.

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM

Golly, I've seen typhoid in lumber-camps!

MONRO AS WILL KENNICOTT appears,
examining FIDDI AS BEA.

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM

Have they got it very bad?

MONRO AS WILL KENNICOTT and SLOAN
AS MILES BJORNSTAM help FIDDI AS BEA
to another room.

MONRO AS WILL KENNICOTT

Oh, we'll take good care of them.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

Won't you need a nurse?

MONRO AS WILL KENNICOTT

Why--couldn't you get Bea's cousin, Tina?

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM

(off)

She's down at the old folks', in the country.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

Then let me do it! They need someone to cook for them, and isn't it good to give them
sponge baths, in typhoid?

SLOAN AS HARRY appears. GUTHRIE AS
CAROL sinks into a chair, listening to the
narration hollow-eyed.

SLOAN AS HARRY

All week, from eight each morning till midnight, Carol fed them, bathed them, smoothed
sheets, took temperatures. Kennicott came in three times a day, unchangingly tender and
hopeful in the sick-room, evenly polite to Miles. Bea had stayed on her feet too long at
the beginning. One early evening she startled them--

(FIDDI AS BEA screams, off)

--With intense abdominal pain, and within half an hour she was in a delirium.

(leaves, but continues in voiceover)

The morning after, Carol watched Olaf's strength oozing.

His ribs were grim clear lines, his skin was clammy, his pulse was feeble but terrifyingly rapid. Late that afternoon he sobbed, and died. Bea did not know it. She was delirious. Next morning, when she went, she did not know that Miles's son would not go East to college. When the time for the funeral came, Carol was in bed, collapsed. She assumed that neighbors would go. It was only by chance that, leaning on her elbow in bed, she glanced through the window and saw the funeral of Bea and Olaf. There was no music, no carriages. There was only Miles Bjornstam, in his black wedding-suit, walking quite alone, head down, behind the shabby hearse that bore the bodies of his wife and baby. That afternoon Juanita Haydock dropped in to brighten Carol.

FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK

(appearing)

Too bad about this Bea that was your hired girl. But I don't waste any sympathy on that man of hers. Everybody says he drank too much, and treated his family awful, and that's how they got sick.

Lights out on FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK and GUTHRIE AS CAROL and up on SLOAN and MONRO AS ASTOR sitting in a chair and holding a drink, looking weak but stronger, and irritated.

MONRO AS ASTOR

How many people?

SLOAN

Guthrie thinks maybe 15 will come out of 20-some who RSVPd. Ever had that many people in this barn?

MONRO AS ASTOR

Nump. About that many Holsteins, though.

SLOAN

Not even at harvest?

MONRO AS ASTOR

This is a dairy barn.

SLOAN

I worry about all these candles.

MONRO AS ASTOR

Haven't had hay in here for 30 years.

SLOAN

I'm sure you'll know everybody.

MONRO AS ASTOR

It's my funeral.

SLOAN

No! It's a celebration, yes, but not a celebration of life--a celebration of--

GUTHRIE appears with three lighted candles.

SLOAN

Guthrie, what are we celebrating?

GUTHRIE

(handing them candles)

Astor home from the hospital!

MONRO AS ASTOR

(refusing candle)

No, thanks. Am I paying for this?

GUTHRIE

Of course not! I'm still working. Long distance, don'tcha know.

SLOAN leaves, irritated.

GUTHRIE

We've met a lot of your friends in the last few weeks. Monroe is doing *pro bono* design for the Sinclair Lewis Association. Both of us have become a little obsessed with Sauk Centre, past and present.

MONRO AS ASTOR

Fictional and actual.

GUTHRIE

Sometimes I even get them confused. Ideas from *Main Street* still relevant, holdovers, characters like ghosts. You ever have that experience?

MONRO AS ASTOR

Nump.

GUTHRIE

I tend to get a little caught up in research. Here comes your doctor--

FIDDI AS DR SKLAR appears with a candle.
GUTHRIE nods and leaves.

FIDDI AS DR SKLAR

Not overdoing the excitement?

MONRO AS ASTOR

Nump.

FIDDI AS DR SKLAR

And what are you--?

MONRO AS ASTOR

Lemonade.

FIDDI AS DR SKLAR

Good, good. So what's this sposed to be?

MONRO AS ASTOR

Not sure.

FIDDI AS DR SKLAR

Your family's very attentive. Checked on you real regular at the hospital.

MONRO AS ASTOR

Some of 'em.

FIDDI AS DR SKLAR

Haven't been out to your farm for years. Looks like this part of the world when our great-grandparents arrived, pretty.

MONRO AS ASTOR

That's the idea. My grandfather got federal grants to drain the sloughs, dig out boulders, chop down trees, and I got state grants to do the opposite. Planted prairie dropseed, side oats grama, blue grama--is that Wim over there?

FIDDI AS DR SKLAR

Sure is. Also very attentive. You have some good friends.

MONRO AS ASTOR

(gestures toward WIM)

I need an attorney more--

You betcha.

FIDDI AS DR SKLAR

FIDDI AS DR SKLAR leaves and GUTHRIE
AS WIM comes over with a candle.

GUTHRIE AS WIM

A little uncomfortable with open flames!

MONRO AS ASTOR

Is Martin coming tonight?

GUTHRIE AS WIM

I haven't heard--should I call--?

MONRO AS ASTOR

Please.

GUTHRIE AS WIM

He said he got everything worked out--

MONRO AS ASTOR

I had another thought.

GUTHRIE AS WIM
(dialing phone)

Sure.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE appears with a candle.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

How're you feeling, Astor?

GUTHRIE AS WIM
(leaving)

Martin, I wonder if you could meet once more with Astor--
(disappears)

MONRO AS ASTOR

OK, considering.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

Have you seen Guthrie's friend, Monro?

MONRO AS ASTOR

Who?

Lights out on FIDDI AS SIGGIE and up on
SLOAN AS HARRY, drink in hand.

SLOAN AS HARRY

Astor glared at the wake-cum-funeral-cum-homecoming, trying to figure out whom to blame. Guthrie was clearly behind it, and Sloan could have stopped it but didn't.

(drinks)

Still, it was good to see a few friends, some lifetime. And the barn cleaned up real nice, didn't smell too much like a hundred years of cattle, manure and silage. But an atmosphere of imminent disaster prevailed, a desperation in Guthrie's eyes that lent a manic quality to the evening, unsettling everyone just enough to put them on edge. Astor needed a real drink, but couldn't see anyone who'd be willing to sneak one past the watchful Ulrichsons and Dr. Sklar.

SLOAN AS HARRY slips the drink into
MONRO AS ASTOR'S hand just before they
both disappear. Lights up on FIDDI AS
SIGGIE and GUTHRIE AS CLARE with a
candle and a drink.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

Do you know Monro?

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

We met once when I showed them the library.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

(re: candles)

I feel like any minute I'm gonna sing *Silent Night*.

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

Did you hear about the wolves?

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

More than one?

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

A pack killed three calves up by Alec.

Gesturing, GUTHRIE AS CLARE spills her
drink. MONRO appears.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

Monro! There you are!

GUTHRIE AS CLARE

(leaving)

Excuse me, I'm having a little trouble between the *drankje en kandelaar!*

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

Can you come to the store tomorrow?

MONRO

I was planning on it. I have something for you. But I might as well get it now.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

Here in the barn?

MONRO

Down at the house--won't take a minute.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

Tomorrow's fine. Now that Astor's better, will you be going back to California?

MONRO

Not sure. Probably, at least right away, but I expect we'll be back sooner than later.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

So you like Sauk Centre?

MONRO

More than I thought I would, certainly!

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

Such nice folks.

Lights out on them and up on SLOAN AS
MILES BJORNSTAM and GUTHRIE AS
CAROL.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

Miles!

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM

Surprised I was invited?

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

I'm surprised I was invited. I hardly know a soul.

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM

Gonna buy a farm in northern Alberta--far off from folks as I can get.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

I'm leaving, too, at least for a while. Going to our nation's capital to see if I can be of help to the suffragists. Shaking the dust off my feet as I leave town.

FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG rushes up.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

Erik!

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM

Pardon me. I've got to go shake some dust myself.

SLOAN AS MILES BJORNSTAM disappears.

FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG

Couldn't stand not seeing you. Every day, towards evening, felt I had to see you--pictured you so clear--I've been good though, staying away, haven't I?

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

And you must go on being good.

FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG

Why must I?

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

Dear, I do think there's a tiny streak of fairy in you--whatever you do with it. Perhaps I'd have loved that once. But it's too late. I'll keep a fondness for you. Impersonal--I will be impersonal! In any case, I'm leaving town.

FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG

I'll go with you!

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

You mustn't.

FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG

I've made a plan to escape to New York and become an actor in motion pictures! We can go to New York together.

MONRO AS WILL KENNICOTT suddenly appears.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

Oh--Will!

MONRO AS WILL KENNICOTT

Valborg! I heard you're off to Gotham!

FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG

Yes! I've come--I've come to say good-bye!

(glances from one to the other, flustered)

Good-bye!

FIDDI AS ERIK VALBORG disappears.

MONRO AS WILL KENNICOTT

I was perfectly polite.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

Of course you were. Everyone here is perfectly polite.

Lights out on them and up on SLOAN AS HARRY, obviously drunk but holding it together mostly.

SLOAN AS HARRY

One evening after about a year on her own in Washington DC, Carol was at a motion picture show. The film was a highly advertised and abysmal thing smacking of simpering hairdressers, cheap perfume and complacent fat women chewing gum. On the screen, in the role of a composer, appeared an actor called Eric Valour. She was startled, incredulous, then wretched. Looking straight out at her, wearing a beret and a velvet jacket, was Erik Valborg. He had a pale part, which he played neither well nor badly.

Lights up on GUTHRIE.

GUTHRIE

I could have made so much of him. (exasperated noise)

SLOAN AS HARRY

Carol came back to Kennicott, back to Gopher Prairie.

(drinking)

Guthrie hovered between worlds, between ancient fiction and present action, knowing fate would render a verdict shortly, perhaps even at this very party, fate dressed as Astor Ulrichson. Was Guthrie from Sauk Centre or of Gopher Prairie?

Lights up on FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK
and out on SLOAN AS HARRY.

FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK

A soiree in a cow barn!

GUTHRIE moos.

FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK

Imagine!

GUTHRIE

Like an industrial artist's loft in New York or California. Surely you've seen them there, Juanita, knowing the Coast as well as you do.

FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK

And you are?

GUTHRIE

Your host, or one of 'em.

FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK

I had no idea when I accepted--!

GUTHRIE

Astor Ulrichson's family. But I don't remember inviting you.

FIDDI AS JUANITA HAYDOCK

Cocktails in a manure gutter with a raft of Svenskas!

GUTHRIE

Grit and grime and a passionate embrace of our country's immigrant heritage is all the rage among the coastal elites! In a hundred years or so, the unwashed middle might catch up.

Lights out on them and up on SLOAN and
MONRO AS ASTOR.

MONRO AS ASTOR

Who invited all these people?

SLOAN

Guthrie and Monro.

MONRO AS ASTOR

To my barn.

SLOAN

It's to celebrate your homecoming.

MONRO AS ASTOR

I have no idea who half these people are.

A wolf howls in the distance.

SLOAN

We met a lot of folks while you were sick.

MONRO AS ASTOR

Send them home!

SLOAN

Tell that to Guthrie!

A wolf howls, closer.

SLOAN

Wolves! I can't believe it!

(runs off)

FIDDI shows up with the Dragoonov.

MONRO AS ASTOR

There's my Dragoonov! Give it!

FIDDI

(keeping the gun from MONRO AS
ASTOR)

Everyone, please remain calm. Yes, I spotted some wolves, and even a bear and
whatever, but they won't come near--

(holds up candle)

They're afraid of people--and fire!

MONRO AS ASTOR

(pulling grass off FIDDI)

You trampled my butterfly weed! My blue false indigo!

GUTHRIE
(appearing)

There are no wolves!

Sounds of wolf howls all around. Screams from the guests. MONRO AS ASTOR tries to grab the Dragunov from FIDDI.

FIDDI
Astor, I'm a great shot!

MONRO AS ASTOR
Purple coneflower, oxeye, meadow
blazing star!

FIDDI
Stop this tohubohu!

MONRO AS ASTOR
Hoary puccoon, wild lupine, large-
flowered beard tongue!

In their struggle, the candle goes flying and the gun goes off. More screams, sound of glass breaking! FIDDI runs off with the gun. Lights up on SLOAN AS HARRY, plastered.

SLOAN AS HARRY
It was fortunate the turn-out for the
reception was so paltry. The barn wasn't
at all crowded, and despite the panic--

MONRO AS ASTOR
Grey-headed coneflower, Canada wildeye,
Indian grass, black-eyed Susan, cup plant--

Sounds of screams as FIDDI AS JUANITA
HAYDOCK runs past and MONRO AS ASTOR
collapses.

--The wolves--
(wolf howls as GUTHRIE AS WIM runs
past)
Soviet sniper rifles--
(gunshots as FIDDI AS SIGGIE runs
past)

Everyone escaped the conflagration of the hundred-year-old barn. The original pillars were mere stripped tree trunks, and despite Astor's loving restoration 23 years earlier, the beams were fragile and especially combustible.

Firelight illuminates MONRO AS ASTOR,
perhaps in a seizure.

SLOAN AS HARRY

The party in honor of Astor's resurrection huddled together between the milk house and the orchard on the site of the old pig sty, not for warmth, not for affection, but for protection from wolves. The conflicting congregation heaved a collective sigh as the red paint blistered and the green roof caved in, casting a firework of cinders into the night sky.

GUTHRIE helps MONRO AS ASTOR, no longer struggling or in fiery light, to a seat.
Lights out on SLOAN AS HARRY.

GUTHRIE

I understand.

MONRO AS ASTOR

It's not about the barn.

GUTHRIE

No, a nonprofit can make good use--

MONRO AS ASTOR

--Can take good care--

GUTHRIE

And maintain the conservation easement. So the farm will look like this forever.

MONRO AS ASTOR

And eventually the barn foundation will disappear in switchgrass and big bluestem.

GUTHRIE

A good decision.

Lights out on MONRO AS ASTOR and up on
SLOAN.

SLOAN

Will we still be able to visit?

GUTHRIE

But not stay in the house.

SLOAN

I figured.

GUTHRIE

We moved around so much as kids, the farm was the only--I dunno--stable place--

FIDDI

(appearing with a suitcase)

Do you think the fire was from the curse?

SLOAN

There is no curse.

GUTHRIE

We dodged a bullet.

SLOAN

Literally.

FIDDI

It was dark!

SLOAN

There was light..*from the fire!*

FIDDI

I got distracted by the wolves at the moment of anagoresis.

SLOAN

Never been a good place for animals.

FIDDI

What happened to that dog, Tessie?

GUTHRIE

Tessie was so sweet--

SLOAN

Super friendly dog, but--

MONRO appears with luggage.

GUTHRIE AND SLOAN

Go ahead.

MONRO

I hate that story every time you tell it.

GUTHRIE

This was when the farm still had chickens.

SLOAN

Tessie was an egg eater. Grandpa found shells in her shit one winter. So when we arrived that summer she was gone.

MONRO

But not entirely.

SLOAN

She was tied to a tree in the woods where grandpa shot her. We found her--

GUTHRIE

When the snow melted. Astor took us to Dairy Queen so we'd stop crying--

SLOAN

But doesn't remember--

GUTHRIE

Such a nice dog. You could put your arm--

GUTHRIE starts to cry. After a moment's hesitation, SLOAN holds GUTHRIE. Quiet tears for a moment; perhaps SLOAN also cries. Then SLOAN turns into HARRY, perfectly sober. Lights out on FIDDI and MONRO.

SLOAN AS HARRY

Carol looked across the silent fields to the west. She was conscious of an unbroken sweep of land to the Rockies, to Alaska, a dominion which will rise to unexampled greatness when other empires have grown senile. Before that time, she knew, a hundred generations of Carols will aspire and go down in tragedy devoid of palls and solemn chanting, the humdrum struggle against inertia.

GUTHRIE becomes CAROL.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL

But I have won in this: I've never excused my failures by sneering at my aspirations, by pretending to have gone beyond them. I do not admit that Main Street is as beautiful as it should be! I do not admit that Gopher Prairie is greater or more generous than Europe! I may not have fought the good fight, but I have kept the faith.

SLOAN AS HARRY

A hundred years later, Guthrie isn't exactly Carol. And Sauk Centre isn't exactly Gopher Prairie. Monro can take Guthrie back to Los Angeles and Fiddi and Sloan can rebuild their lives in Texas. But they're all still in America.

(to the audience)

With you.

GUTHRIE AS CAROL and SLOAN AS HARRY watch as lights come up on MONRO and FIDDI AS SIGGIE. They each have a large, awkward, almost identical, tropical fruit. They laugh.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

I ordered this special from our supplier!

MONRO

(re: MONRO'S durian)

You can get anything on Amazon.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE produces a large knife.

MONRO

Don't get fired!

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

(cutting into a durian)

Oh, no one ever comes back here this time of day except you--
(gags as the durian opens)

MONRO

That's...disgusting!

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

Do you think it went bad?

MONRO

No, that's...pretty fresh.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE produces spoons.

MONRO

You first.

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

(sticking a spoon in the durian)

No, we jump off the high dive together.

MONRO gets a spoonful of durian. Both of them look askance at their spoonfuls.

MONRO

It really does smell like shit, doesn't it?

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

Yes, but--

FIDDI AS SIGGIE and MONRO down their spoonfuls.

MONRO

Holy crap!

FIDDI AS SIGGIE

It's soooo good!

They smile and eat more durian.

THE END